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The [illegible]age of Peace

DEAN CHURCH

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THE MESSAGE OF PEACE

AND OTHER SERMONS.

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THE MESSAGE OF PEACE,

And other Christmas Sermons.

BY THE LATE

R. W. CHURCH,

DEAN OF ST. PAUL'S.

PUBLISHED UNDER THE DIRECTION OF THE TRACT COMMITTEE.

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THE MESSAGE OF PEACE.

I.

THE MESSAGE OF PEACE.

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will towards men."—St. Luke ii. 14.

The Song of the Angels was the first public preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Its advent had been announced privately to those who were elected to be its instrument, in dream and vision, in angelic salutation, in inspirations of the Holy Ghost. To Zacharias in the Temple, to Mary in the secret chamber, in the night watches to Joseph, in the joy of her unborn child to Elisabeth, the assurance of its approach had been given. It had been recognized and welcomed in words such as had never yet burst from the hearts of men, from human gladness, from human hope—"My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my

spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour." "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He hath visited and redeemed His people," and among those unknown and hidden souls who are called to bear its first glory and its first burden, its special significance was proclaimed. "Through the tender mercy of our God, whereby the Dayspring from on high hath visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace."

But beyond the sacred home at Nazareth, and in the priestly city in the hill-country of Judah, the first announcement to those outside, to the representatives of those "poor to whom the Gospel was to be preached," was in the angelic visit and the angelic "Gospel of great joy," to the shepherds who were watching in the fields where the patriarchs had fed their flocks. Their hymn of praise, which was the first news to the world that its Saviour was come, was also the first note in that triumphant song of deliverance, which was taken up by the Church below, to be con-

tinued day by day through the centuries over all the earth, and never to cease till it shall swell into the "new song" of the Church above. With the Lord's Prayer, with the Magnificat and Benedictus and Nunc Dimittis, it became a stated and necessary part of the public language of the Church in its most solemn worship. In its highest offering of Eucharistic praise, the words of the Seraphim in the Temple under the Old Dispensation, Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts, are answered by those of the Angels around Bethlehem in the New—"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will towards men."

"On earth peace." That was what the Angels saw of special significance to mankind, in the "glad tidings" which they announced. It was a message of peace: may we not on Christmas Day spend a few minutes in thinking of what so filled the thoughts and quickened the joy of the Angels?

"The Gospel a message of peace." I am afraid that in not a few who hear such

words, they may raise a smile. They will think of the course of history to this hour, and ask whether it does not furnish a comment of the most supreme irony on the words and claims of the "Gospel of peace." They will ask whether it has brought peace into the distracted and disturbed souls and thoughts of men, torn and divided between counter appearances, by conflicting proofs, by irreconcilable trains of reasoning, by opposing forms and tendencies of their own nature? They will ask whether it ever yet reconciled the world,—all its sins, its mistakes, its wishes and strivings for better things, its incorrigible faults, with God its maker, its hope, its fear? Is that great body of mankind which St. Paul described as alienated from God and at enmity with Him through wicked works, now after all the long years really more at peace with Him? reconciled to His government, to His righteousness, to His claims? What shall we say of that "vision of peace," which was ever before the minds of the prophets, and that peace which was the solemn and parting bequest of our Master,

which was the perpetual benediction and salutation of apostles to all Christian souls? How much of that "peace of God which passeth all understanding," which is invoked weekly and daily upon us, to go with us when we pass from God's altar or His sanctuary, really descends upon our Christian society? True, Jesus Christ said also Himself, that He came to bring not peace but a sword: His life was a life of conflict, of war without rest or pause against opposing evil. But is it only the conflict between *good* and evil which disturbs peace? Is it only the war between truth and falsehood, between righteousness and sin, between Christ and Belial—is *that* the simple and sufficient account of the quarrels and divisions of men, of the jars and hatreds which fill the souls, and which like the troubled sea can never rest? Is this enough to account for the animosities of neighbourhoods, of social circles, of classes, of parties, of Churches? Is it credible that in these enmities, the good and the certainty should be all on one side, and the evil and the mistakes all on the other? Is

this really the "sword," which Jesus Christ said that He came to bring—the sword against nothing but unrighteousness and sin? or is it not rather the negative of the peace which He loves and which He gave us, the peace which He died to purchase and plant in the world, the peace which is His supreme and Eternal blessing to all that live? I do not ask these questions now to look for their answer, or to seek for the account to be given of the strange contrast between the Gospel message of peace, and the palpable facts of history and social life. That is not the business of to-day. But I *do* ask them, in order to help this day's services to bring home to our own separate consciences the fact itself of this contrast. I ask them that each one of us may honestly put it to himself, "what part have I in the faults that *must* be somewhere? How much am I to blame for this ugly and hateful thwarting of the purpose of God?"

We cannot perhaps go into the tangled skein of sins and mistakes, and necessities created by sins, which have in the course of

ages so strongly turned aside the fulfilment of the Gospel of peace, and brought us to where we are—quarrelling, fighting, seeing nothing inconsistent and perplexing in violence, revenge, destruction. But we can do *this*. We can do something to see that our own hearts, and consciences, and thoughts, have before them the true standard and ideal of peace, which was one of the new characteristics of the Gospel announced by the Angels. We can, for ourselves, train and bridle feelings and impulses, in the serious belief that Christ means us in every way that is possible, as a great and paramount duty, to follow peace. If anything is certain, it is that a peaceful temper, a temper which loves, and honours, and desires peace, is of the essence of the Christian character. "Follow peace with all men," says the apostle, "and holiness without which no man shall see the Lord."

"Peace and purity." These are the two capital points in which the Gospel was an innovation and revelation in the moral standard of the ancient world. The ancient

world had noble, if imperfect, ideas of courage, of justice; it had noble thoughts of friendship; it had noble conceptions of public duty and of a man's debt to his country. But it looked upon war and conflict as the natural field for the highest virtues, as it looked upon purity as a matter of varying expediency and uncertain sentiment. It looked on the world as a battle-field for the trial of strength between nations and men, as science would sometimes fain see in the struggle for life an account of the natural world as we find it. It had no misgivings about strife and war: they were what men were born to by the law of their existence, conditions which none could alter, which none with honour could escape from. It was a great reversal of all accepted moral judgement, of all popular traditions, of all current assumptions, when the teaching of the Gospel put in the forefront of its message, God's value for peace, and His blessing upon it; when it placed peace as a divine and magnificent object to be aimed at and sought for, with the earnestness with which men aimed at

glory. When it set high among its own new Beatitudes, high among the tempers and virtues which were to renew mankind, the spirit, the self-restraints, which make for peace. As it made us know what God thinks of purity, so it made us know what God thinks of peace. And both announcements were, in the strength with which they were made, surprises to the world. Both were corrections of men's natural and long accepted ideas. Both raised the imperfect moral standards of men to a divinely-sanctioned height, and however in practice Christians may have fallen short of them, these standards of what is true and right never have been, and never can be lowered.

It is a truism that Christianity is a religion of peace. It is also a truism that Christians have often made it a religion of quarrels, persecutions, and bloodshed, and that custom makes us strangely insensible to the anomaly of a religion of peace, compatible with strife, tolerant of litigation, patient of war. The Church — not the world only, but the Church and Christian society, seems to have disappointed the

hopes of Apostles, seems to have persisted in the path which the Prince of Peace came to lead it from. But however God may allow His purposes to be crossed by the weakness and disobedience and perverseness of man, what we individually have to consider is, whether we will associate ourselves with what we know to be His voice; or whether we will ignore it, neglect it, prefer to it ideals of our own, measures of right which are not His. You say that you cannot make the world other than it is. Of course you cannot: the world is not given you either to understand, or to govern, or to change. But there is one thing which you can do, you can prevent yourself from being like the world in its evil.—True indeed, amid its fierce jarring elements, its passions that none can tame, its imperious public opinion, its long settled customs, its fixed rules of honour, of expediency, of prudence, of interest, its vast and scientific machinery, created only because of the vast scale on which men and nations do carry on their implacable quarrels, the strongest may well feel powerless—as powerless as

we feel amid the irresistible forces of nature. True also, there are other virtues besides those of peace. There are for Christ's disciples, the virtues, and there are the occasions, of resistance, of conflict, of attack, of war without truce, not merely in the religious, but in the political and secular sphere of duty. It would be an evil day when a Christian became deaf to the public call on his manliness, his courage, his daring, his self-devotion. There are solemn times when he has not only to die, but to fight and make others die. These are times when, for the sake of his brethren, for the sake of truth, for the sake of his Master, he must resist evil, falsehood, disobedience, wrong. Yet for all this, it remains true that Christ's religion is the religion of peace; and till we feel how serious and earnest the New Testament is in the honour which it gives to peace, we have missed its spirit. If, while this world lasts, the divisions of mankind are too strong for peace, if in the struggle of "mighty opposites" our strength goes for nothing, at least we, each one of us, are

lords over ourselves. One thing, at least whatever else is not, is given over to our own power; our heart and will. In this little corner of the world we hold dominion. This drop, it may be, in the stream of influence is ours to deal with; is ours to be responsible for. Whether we will or no, men round us, our friends perhaps, will quarrel, and take and give offence, and heap up wrongs, and settle into estrangement, and lose all power of doing justice to one another; step by step endurance is exhausted, and honour is supposed to be touched, and the law, perhaps, is appealed to, and the wound to peace becomes incurable. We look on and judge: we cannot, it may be, prevent it: but at least we can be warned, we can help imitating it. Again, whether we will or no, religious dissension will continue to set the world in flame. Apostles themselves were not able to bridle it; and in its train, the bitterest rancour still justifies itself under the name of zeal for God's truth, and injustice and persecution are defended out of jealousy for His honour. We cannot stop heresies, schism,

divisions: we cannot chain down party spirit, and make men fair; but at least in these inevitable differences of thought and conviction, we can take care of our own hearts: we need not be little because others are: we need not be unfair, because others are: we need not forget our own short-sightedness, our prejudices, our own obligation to the great law of charity and justice, because others have no misgivings in their judgement, and no limits to their hatreds. Again, whether we will or no, the day is doubtless far distant, when the nations will not learn war any more: it is something, that some slight and imperfect approaches have been made to it; but we are told only too truly that it is a dream to think that it is yet coming. But for all that, the Song of the Angels is God's supreme benediction to the earth, "on earth peace, good will towards men." In all that, the King of all the ages, the Lord of Hosts, is the "Prince of Peace." Surely when He speaks of peace, He *means* peace; He means the tempers of peace, the moderation and self-restraint of peace, the strong

sense of equity, the curbing of ambition, the aversion to boastfulness, and violence, and insolent self-assertion, which are the conditions and pledges of peace. What will He say, at His judgement seat, of the great swelling words of pride and defiance of which history is full? What will he say of those national antipathies and hatreds, so lightly and easily kindled, so obstinate when once kindled, so unreasoning, so ignorant, so absolutely proof to argument or remonstrance, which have turned the fairest lands of the world into fields of blood? Will He accept, at the bar of Eternal justice, as a plea for precipitate and needless wars, the "proud instincts of an imperial race?" No, if we know anything of the mind of Jesus Christ, He will not. Such things may be utterly out of our power to hinder or influence. Such things may be right, as a philosophy which denies or refuses Jesus Christ, and accepts as the best that old world which He came to change, and transform, and renew. But we Christians, who shall have to give an account for every idle word, we shall

surely have to give an account for every vainglorious, every reckless, every insolent word, by which, in our business, our religion, our conduct as citizens, our social relations, our many contests, peace has been endangered, or has been made more difficult.

May God keep us ever from trifling with that sacred name of peace. May He keep us from undervaluing it, in comparison with our own aims and purposes, even though disinterested and high. May He keep us from thinking lightly of what *He* loves so well: what He has made the symbol and crown of His great work of mercy to man; which He has inspired all His servants, psalmist and prophet, Angels and apostles, to desire and long for, and rejoice in: in which His Son sums up His complete gift and blessing to His redeemed. "Peace on earth." "Peace I leave with you." "Peace be unto you." "The peace of God which passeth all understanding." Do not let any one cheat us out of our inheritance of peace, tempt us from our duty to peace, by saying that

God means peace for Heaven, not for earth. He means it for time as well as for eternity. It belongs to those who *will have* it, who are in earnest about it—*outwardly*, much more than men choose to believe—inwardly, altogether. Let us in the name of the God of peace defy the mocking voices, which appeal to experience to prove that the world can be but a great scene of strife, that none but enthusiasts can dream here of peace. That will be according to our faith. That will be according as we master—and by God's grace we *can* master —the powers of evil which are enemies to peace.

"Whence come wars and fightings among you? Come they not hence, even from your lusts that war in your members?" "The works of the flesh are manifest—hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings." What Christian can dare to say that the works of the spirit are beyond his attainment, beyond his trying—"love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance"? And where these are, *there*, in

the words of another apostle, "The fruit of righteousness is sown in peace, by them that make peace." Surely not sown in vain, even in the midst of this wilful and troublesome world. Let us listen in earnest to His last great words, which the departing year once more repeats from the mouths of the Angels. Let us be sure that we hear in them the very will of God, the very heart's desire of Jesus Christ. Let us be sure that in them is a secret message, a warning, or encouragement to each one of our own consciences. The religion which comes to us from Bethlehem and from Calvary is, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace."

May the God of peace who loved us all with such wondrous love, teach us something of that blessed Gospel. May He forgive us all those miserable, those amazing littlenesses, so mean yet so fatal; the jealousies, the irritability, the sensitiveness, the guilty selfishnesses, by whatever fine names we call them, to which we so wantonly sacrifice His holy peace.

May He pardon us our careless, or dis-

dainful, or treacherous words against what is so sacred in His eyes. May He answer our prayer in the largeness of His generous mercy, beyond the meaning we ourselves put upon it. "O Lamb of God, that takest away the sins of the world, Grant us thy Peace."

MAN'S IDEALS.

II.

MAN'S IDEALS.

"Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world. But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons."—GAL. iv. 3–5.

CHRISTMAS, with its tender, and bright, and touching, and humbling thoughts, brings with it the remembrance of the profound change in the nature and position of man, which followed on the coming of the Son of God in the flesh. God came and visited His creatures, "and was made man." Henceforth, man is what God his Maker has been. He has that nature, he lives that life, he dies that death, which he has in common with the awful Being who was born in Bethlehem, and is to judge him. From that time man was lifted up to a

level far above anything that this world of time had ever known. A new order began, which had not been before. It is spoken of in St. Paul as a "new creation," "a new man." If we think of what St. Paul teaches of this great change, consequent on the Incarnation, and caused by it, the words, strong as they are, are not too strong.

The results, the developments of this great change, have, we know, changed all human history. Far beyond their direct and acknowledged influence, they have swayed the world and its movements. They have penetrated far and wide into all human life, all human ideas, all human character, and activity, and motive. They have altered the proportions and the meaning of our present stage of being. They have made it at once, infinitely more sacred and precious, and infinitely of less account. They have turned the eternal farewells of death into the tender commendations to Christ's mercy and forgiveness and peace, and into the transporting hope of the vision of God. Great, and manifold, and inexhaustible are the workings in mankind of

that change, of which human language cannot adequately give the measure. For a few moments this morning, I will say a few words about one of them.

Consider, then, what has happened, since that coming in the flesh which we are thinking of to-day, in relation to the Ideal of man; the Ideal of what he should be, of his character, of his perfection; the Ideal of man before Christ came to us; the Ideal of man since we have known Him, and He has been with us.

1. Man has never been able to live without his Ideal. The wildest savages, the rudest barbarians, have their ideals, as well as we, of what man should be. But the ideal of the natural man, of man before the great change of the Gospel, would be a high and noble one. There was such an ideal when human society rose step by step out of brutality and license into the great civilized states of the heathen world, when the love of one's fellow-men showed itself in the form of enthusiastic loyalty to that country which embraced them all; when the state was the object of affection

and devotion; when a common citizenship was the great acknowledged bond; public-spirited readiness to do and to sacrifice anything for one's country was the height —and who can deny that it was a very noble one—of human goodness. Nay, there was something known, even beyond that, though it was a unique and barren instance; we men had known and learned to admire and honour, but not to imitate, one who had, like Socrates, died for the Truth, and died to do good to those who slew him. Courage, patriotism, honour, self-sacrifice for the right, and a care for all the ties of kindred and the tendernesses of friendship, were no unworthy ideals; and they were the ideals of Greece and Rome. Justice, and fortitude, and self-mastery, and wisdom, and duty faithfully and exactly discharged at any cost, were the standard already acknowledged there, by unregenerate men. They were compatible with much that lowered and spoiled them. They were often in fact associated with terrible sins; but often, to our own shame and humiliation, men who knew not our

Lord, recognized their obligations, and partially fulfilled them. These were the ideals of the West, of those from whom we have inherited our traditions of social right and order. The ideals which men reached to in the East were even more remarkable. Centuries before our Lord came there was a great religious reformation in India. We know it by the name of Buddhism. The ideal of this was complete sacrifice of all that was pleasant to flesh and blood, for the sake of the soul —to deliver the soul from the passions, and ignorance, and slavery, and burdens of this mortality. And it was accompanied by two things: the most passionate enthusiasm to communicate with, and so to help and deliver others; and a spirit of tender and all-embracing kindness, which expressed itself in the most touching language, and embodied itself in the most touching acts; which sought out the forlorn and the miserable, and which willingly associated itself with the degradation of the outcast, and with the shame and doom of the sinner. This ideal did once exist

among men, however soon it came to be alloyed with superstition, and hardened into formalism: however little it actually was able to raise and to console men; however mixed it was with fantastic extravagances which we here are not able even to understand. It was a law of action which prescribed to itself, in spirit and will, the meaning of the Second Table of the Decalogue; which required a man to keep nothing for himself, but to spend and be spent for others; which required him to hide every fond deed, and to make the most open and minute avowal of all his faults; which demanded from the proudest and the mightiest the confession of that common lot of error and sin and weakness which they showed with the humblest; which could inspire the love and the courage of the martyr, and give power over the hearts of men, and teach the lesson of noble resignation and obedience, and raise up a great company of preachers, as gentle and tolerant as they were earnest and unwearied. Such an ideal was presented to the men of the East before our Lord appeared.

These ideals, different as they are, are the greatest that history shows us in the Gentile world, before the Incarnation, and there was this feature common to all of them. They almost, or altogether, left out God. Not but that the name of God, and still more, the names of "Gods many and Lords many," were on men's lips, and the memorials of them before their eyes. Not that the awful and mysterious name of God did not awaken in the serious Greek or Roman the presage of his Maker, his Ruler, the Judge of right, the Avenger of wrong. But his moral Ideal stood by itself, on its own foundations. It did not need God. It did not aspire to God. It did without Him. And to the highest ideals of the East, God was not even an imagination or a name. With the deep and spiritual meaning which they read into what are the Commandments of the Second Table, they were absolutely and resolutely blind to the First. The world to them was "empty," except of evil; to these ascetics of self-conquest, beneficence, and patient humility, it was "empty even of God."

And their highest hope was not immortality, but annihilation.

Great and wonderful and sometimes overpowering were all these fragmentary forms of goodness—reflections of the mind of the All-perfect, where we meet with them in the old world—"Light shining in the darkness, and the darkness comprehending it not." Let us thank God that even to them who knew Him not His Spirit witnessed in their hearts and consciences to His Law and Righteousness:—witnessed for justice, for purity, for humility, for loving-kindness, for an unselfish and public zeal. Why should we not acknowledge and reverence them, though they were so evanescent, though they failed to perpetuate themselves, though they were so maimed and imperfect, though they had no spring in them of recovery and self-correction? They were for their time. But they had no root. They blossomed, and withered away, and left no fruit. Yet God was pleased to be patient with what St. Paul calls "the times of this ignorance," till "the fulness of the time was come." We may

look back on them, and their history, in silent awe, and leave them in His hands till He comes to judgement.

But to us the "times of ignorance" are past. There had been an ideal of man in the world all the while of a very different kind. One family of mankind had preserved the great faith that man was the object of God's care and love, and that he was fit to be the object of God's care. Promise and legislation and history, the songs and complaints and raptures of Psalmists, the terrible lessons and unearthly visions of Prophets, had kept up this faith. One great theme, in every conceivable variation, sounds through the whole of the Old Testament, and it is this:—"O God, Thou art my God; early will I seek Thee. My soul thirsteth for Thee, my flesh also longeth after Thee, in a barren and dry land where no water is. Thus have I looked for Thee in holiness, that I might behold Thy power and glory. For Thy loving kindness is better than the life itself: my lips shall praise Thee." "Like as the hart desireth the

water-brooks, so longeth my soul after Thee, O God. My soul is athirst for God, yea, even for the living God: when shall I come to appear before the presence of God?" Man was made to know and to love the living God: and the living God, who had made man, meant Himself, to be known and loved by His creature. Man was lifted up from being the head of the visible creation here: from being the noblest and most richly endowed with gifts and powers of all living things on earth, and also, *because* so great in his instincts and aspirations and yet so weak and frail, really the unhappiest—he was lifted up to feel that he belonged to a world beyond the bounds of mortality and sight; that he had to do with the righteousness and the love of the Everlasting and the All-merciful; that he might hope, in spite of sin and pain and death, to be of the family of the Holiest, in the "land of the living." Long before our Lord came, the foundation of man's ideal had been laid in the first and great commandment—"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God, with

all thy heart and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength." According as man is called to do this, and is supposed capable of doing it, the ideal of man varies by a difference that nothing can bridge over.

And at last God's time came. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth: and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only-begotten of the Father. He came to His own, and His own received Him not. But to as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the children of God, to them that believe on His name." Such a revelation—such an opening of the unseen and eternal world—could not be, without a corresponding change in the standard and idea of what man was, of what he should be. It is shown in every page and every line of the New Testament.

For now, not to one family and nation, but to the whole world of mankind, was to be declared the relation in which man

stood to God: that man might know God, and love God, and be knit and bound to God by the closest and most real of ties. That relation to the Father, dim in Western morality, lost in Eastern morality, was henceforth to occupy its due and natural and commanding place, in the thoughts and feelings of mankind. The huge gap in man's idea of his life was filled up. Man was not an orphan, thrown destitute like the shipwrecked sailor on life[1], not knowing whence he came, or what was his destiny; he was not fatherless, the sport and victim of the blind forces of nature, with no living love and care above him, to which he might lift up his heart, and know that he was answered. He was not simply the creature, the servant, the worshipper, the disciple, of the Unapproachable and Invisible, taught by His law, visited in secret by His mysterious whispers to conscience, enlightened and comforted by the

[1] "Tum porro puer, ut sævis projectus ab undis
Navita, nudus, humi jacet, infans, indigus omni
Vitali auxilio . . .
Quoi tantum in vita restet transire malorum."
Lucret. v.

Holy Spirit of wisdom and of prophecy—he was henceforth more than all this—for One had come to open his eyes to the realities of what he was made for, and amid which he lived: One who was like him, and spoke his words, and shared his lot: and He who thus came to him, and whom he saw, and touched, was God: God who made him: God, who from everlasting had been all in all to His creatures. Then, for the first time, he learned, as he had never learned before, what sin was. Then, for the first time, he learned the height and depth of the righteousness of God. Then, for the first time, he knew what real forgiveness was. Then, for the first time, he knew what was waiting at the end of this mortal life. A new character, not only of fresh moral force, but new altogether in spiritual height and capacity and aspiration, appeared among men; it wrought great things in the world, it was sung by great poets; the character, in all its manifold variations of depth and power and beauty and majesty, of the Christian saint. Beside it, the glory, the real great-

ness of the heathen hero, took a lower place. Goodness, not strength, became the true measure of action; and "the thoughts of men were widened," from even the mightiest exploits, and happiest hours on this scene of time, to the high purpose and noble pains of penitence and self-discipline, and to the ineffable joys of paradise. "The Spirit beareth witness with our spirit that we are the children of God; and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ: if so be that we suffer with Him, that we may be also glorified together. . . . For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God. . . . Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God."

Could man's ideal, even the highest and the noblest, remain the same, after such announcements as these? Is it conceivable, in the soberest reason, that after such things as these, man should think of himself, of what he is, and what he should be, as he

had before? Is it possible to overstate the natural consequences of them? And these things are what all we Christians believe. Nothing which confines man's action and responsibilities to the present can satisfy their claim: nothing—however great, however noble, however urgent, however touching; beyond all, there is the absorbing truth, that this is but a fragment of a life, and not a life complete and finished in itself—only the foreground of an endless perspective: that God our Maker has been with us to direct, to elevate, to save it: that of all man's relations to beings round him, his relations to God his Father are the greatest, to his Incarnate Redeemer, the deepest. Man has still to live his appointed days on earth. He *must* live then according to the conditions, physical, moral, social, which one greater than man has imposed upon him. He *must* live in society, and fulfil the obligations which social and political life imply and require. He *must* render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's. He *must*, if his life here is not to be a wreck and

a ruin, submit himself to the law of duty, of reason, of conscience: he must tame the wild beast within him, he must crush the dull brute selfishness, which, at the very height of polished civilization, would cut him off from his kind, in a deadly isolation from sympathy and help and love. But beyond all this, he has to think of something else. He has to think of himself, as not of this swiftly passing scene, but as belonging to a vaster system, from which there is no escape by being immersed in the present. He must think not only of those whom he now sees and speaks to, but of those too whom he will meet when he is dead. He must think of himself as taken out of the shows and appearances which each day brings with it, to be a partaker of what is permanent and for ever. He has a pattern to aim at which is not of this world; and that pattern is the life—if we may speak so with reverence—the character of Jesus Christ. He has a fellowship not of this world, and this fellowship is with the Father and with the Son. He has a hope and a fear beyond

anything conceivable here—the judgement seat of the Son of Man.

And on these things we are sometimes told that we ought, here in the pulpit, to be silent. We stand before the world, which is not so much disposed as it once was to let us off our profession of this great ideal of human life: and we are bid to realize it and make it good to the full, or else to hold our peace. Or we are told that it is superfluous to preach about these things: that they have been preached about for 1800 years, that every one knows them who cares to know them, and that for the rest they have ceased to have interest; that it is time to attend to the real subjects of the day, to the calls of justice, to the redress of wrongs, to the wants and sufferings of those whose lot in the world is so frightfully unequal. Of course, if these things, the consequences of the Christian creed, are not true, it is not only superfluous to preach about them, but something much worse. But what if we are right in believing them to be true? Can anything be *so* unreasonable, as to believe

such things and *not* to speak about them? And, no doubt, it will be a bad day for Christian preaching, when it is not moved by wrong, or forgets the "comfortless trouble's sake of the needy, and the deep sighing of the poor," and "the patient abiding of the meek." Yes, it is the time —it is *always* the time to do this; it is eminently the time to do it now. But *who* taught us to do this? Where and when did men learn this sympathy with suffering, this impatience of wrong? Who, but He who came to make us sons of God, came also, the first of all, to seek the lost, came, first of all, to preach the Gospel to the poor? Who first taught men to copy His example; and what was it that had power to keep up the tradition of that unearthly example through centuries of selfishness and sin? When for 1800 years men have done without Christ, and have risen to a higher morality and a more disinterested beneficence, it may be time to tell us to do without Him. But that time is certainly not yet. But after all, this is no matter for paper arguments. Arguments have

their great place, indispensable and important, but this great debate, which, in one shape or another, has been going on through long ages, and will go on when we all are laid to rest, is not to be settled by them. There the great truths are, for us to take or to leave: with us it rests, whether the true answer shall be given or not, to those who question them. The real, silencing answer is the lives of men, the lives of Christian believers. The world may talk for ever, and talk to little purpose, about the reality of religion. The question really rests with us: whether our life is governed by such things as we are thinking of to-day: whether, whatever we have to do, the consciousness of their truth is around us like the air we breathe: whether, from believing them, we are more true, more honest, more just, more patient, more pure, more self-denying, more cheerfully helpful, more resigned and patient in trouble. O my brethren, be sure of this—*this*, amid the strife of tongues, is the trustworthy and acceptable way of vindicating the ways of Him who has done so

much for us. If only our lives will fairly stand the test which He has intended they should meet, we need not fear when we speak with our enemies in the gate. The Eternal wisdom might, if He had pleased, have stopped for ever the mouths of the gainsayer and the doubter. He has not been pleased to do so. He chose His means of victory and salvation, for us, as for Himself, in the realities of a life, in doing and in suffering. May God forgive us for our miserable attempts to bring the life of faith into the life of work and business. May He forgive us, who accept such great thoughts and hopes, for being content with such poor and intermittent efforts. May God help us to remember that now we are the sons of God, and to discern the import of those tremendous words—"Who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man."

THE LINK BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT.

III.

THE LINK BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT.

"Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and Thy dominion endureth throughout all ages."—Ps. cxlv. 13.

We go back, in heart and mind, to the beginning of that great awakening, among mankind, of hope and love, which we call the Christian religion, and which means nothing less than that Almighty God, our Maker and the Maker of all things, the Infinite and the Eternal, for the sake of His creatures here, and to save them, was made man, came among us, lived among us, died with us. When we think what this is, and when we remember that this world is but one little corner of His boundless kingdom and universe, such grace seems almost too much even for

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God.—"Lord, what is man that thou art mindful of him, or the son of man that thou so regardest him?" Our mind is staggered, till we teach ourselves to take in something of the immensity of God, in His Son, as in His Being and His Power —till we remember that He who made the stars and rules the path of suns, and is the life of the Archangels, feeds the young ravens that call upon Him, and crowns the year with His goodness for bird and beast, for worm and creeping things: that He cares to impress endless beauty where no human eye ever sees it except by chance; that He paints the butterfly and the flower in the pathless forest, and traces the pattern on the microscopic shell at the bottom of unsounded oceans; that not a sparrow falls to the ground without Him, and that He numbers the hairs of our head. Of Him it is credible that He who made man should embrace him in the arms of His mercy, and should remember him and love him, and love him wonderfully and greatly. It is in character, that to bring our race to Him, He should for us

have even been this infant of Bethlehem, the man of sorrows, the crucified.

Since that morning of the Nativity which first made known to men God's purpose about them, and His presence, since that awful day of the Cross and Passion which revealed the immensity of His love, nearly nineteen centuries have passed, centuries of eventfulness and change; but their changes still find us rejoicing in the "glad tidings of great joy"; still building on the Cross and Resurrection the ultimate hopes of the human race; still acknowledging, with awe and with worship, our own share in those hopes, our own infinite obligations to Him who brought them: in various degrees and measures, they shape the lives of men, they furnish the one light and consolation to their death. What is the nature of that link which binds us, on whom the ends of the world are come, to those far distant events? What is the link which binds our altered and busy times with the days when the Son of God was born in Bethlehem of Judea, and ministered on earth to seek and save the lost? What is it which

stretches across the ages, and in spite of the immense gap, with all its ruins and all its vicissitudes, keeps up ever in the world the sense of that Divine interposition, and enables those who *will*, to lay hold on it with conviction and genuine hope, and find in it what not all the world besides can give them? May I ask you for a few minutes this morning, to give your thoughts to this.

I do not now speak of that Divine and unseen power, which is the real agent. I do not speak of that which is behind all the veils of sense and nature, beyond the reach and following of our imagination and thought, the working of that everlasting Spirit, who came, when the Lord went away, to bring new ideas and powers of goodness into the souls of men. I do not speak of that perpetual presence, by which the Lord, the Head of His Body the Church, is ever with His redeemed till the end; by which—we know not how—we still really meet Him. I am not speaking of those mysterious relations, which even while we are in the flesh, bind

us to the other world. I am thinking of what has been done in this present state of things which we know and understand, this world of time and sight and mortality, this world of fact and history, to keep alive among men not merely the knowledge of the great "mystery of godliness," God manifest in the flesh, but the sense and conviction and assurance of its reality, the faith of St. Peter, St. John, and St. Paul.

It is, of course, not by one thing alone, but by many things working together, none of which stand alone, none of which could be dispensed with, none of which could produce its effect by itself, none of which could by itself, without the others, save and guard and transmit and animate to the successive generations of mankind the memory of our Redemption.

1. But first among the forces which have kept it alive, and made it endure in spite of all the sins and all the deathlike corruptions of ages—first and foremost, is the Life, the Personality, the Character, if we may use the word, of Jesus Christ.

It could not be in vain that that Divine beauty, that Divine sanctity, that Divine majesty showed itself to the eyes of men. The world and our experience were not so full of goodness, that when that unapproachable Perfection passed in very deed across the stage and scene of human life, mingled in its events, shared its fortunes, it could fail to arrest the eye of every beholder, it could fail to cast a spell on every heart that owned the charm of truth and righteousness. No such vision had ever presented itself to man's longing, or imagination, as that serious, real life. No other such character, no other such idea of a real humanity—so homely yet so commanding, so plain and lowly yet so universal—*had* been, *has* been, ever known to the vast experience of the world. Such a real life, such an idea of a personality and character—so absolutely unique, so perfectly harmonious in its unity with all its various and opposite elements—could not but keep a hold on the world which it had impressed. It appeals to the deepest springs of human thought and conscious-

ness to own the confession of the Apostles —"and the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father full of grace and truth,"—"Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life."—His enemies knew it well. —"We shall never," is a saying reported of one of them, "get rid of Christianity among civilized nations, till we have destroyed the reverence for the moral character of Christ." Yes, to get rid of light you must destroy the sun. Yes, while the sun is in the heavens the light will find its way even through the thickest clouds.

But has this great wonder of life and character been thrown on the world by itself, as an isolated appearance, to take its chance as a mere idea or historical event, amid the torrents of man's busy and clashing interests, to hold its own, as it can, against his passions, his worldliness, his forgetfulness, his gladness to be rid of the importunities of the unseen and the future? Has it been left in the air, to be passed on

from mouth to mouth, as men comprehended and valued it; left by itself to act on the affinities of congenial minds, to find out individuals in the crowds, and to be their special and privileged treasure? Has it come down to us like the great recognized and public characters of the world, Socrates, and Caesar, and Alfred, literary or traditional portraits of the past, with the same sort of claim on our attention as theirs, and none, if we have other things to think of, dimmed by distance, entangled in questions, blurred by ambiguities, ours to admire if it suits our private tastes, but making no appeal to the common reverence, the common allegiance, the common faith?

2. No, it has been enshrined in a book, like itself, unique in its character, unique in its fortunes, unique in its power. The New Testament, which contains but Divine history and its meaning, is unlike any other book known to man, in the absolute absence of what ordinarily gives fame to books, and in the inexhaustible force with which it lays hold, century after century,

on the sympathy of mankind, and finds its way to the deepest foundations of their souls, in their most solemn and most awful hours, either of hope or pain.

But even the New Testament is a book; and a book, by itself, coming only with its own intrinsic titles to honour and love, is at a disadvantage amid the wild battles of human society, and the storms which agitate its opinions. We do not know what would have happened, if the New Testament had been thrown broadcast on the world, by itself, to tell its own story, and to attract, like a magnet, where it could find them, kindred souls. A book by itself must be liable to be treated as a piece of literature. It must stand its chance of criticism. It must, if it is old, make terms with antiquarianism, and be somewhat at its mercy. It is open to—nay, it invites and tempts—interpretation, interpretation which can so plausibly refine away or confuse its meaning, which can so perversely set "the word against the word," clouding its clearest statements, making it say what it never meant to say. It has

to reckon with the cold insolence of unfriendly reason, with the scorn of the mockers, with the weariness and heartlessness of the dull, with the changes of fashion, with the rivalries of our new claimants for the public ear. A book, by itself, interests, convinces, enflames, individuals; it does not, perhaps, touch their neighbours. With each man it stands or falls, as each man satisfies his judgement about it. The world, too, the great world of those who have not time for learning, and not much for reading, are suspicious of books. They are always apt to think that there is a contrast between what books say, and the realities with which they themselves are familiar: between the old dead, silent writing, and the modern living, fiery thought and motive; between the point to which conviction and obligation are professedly raised, [perhaps strained] in a book, and the degree in which they appear in conduct: between theories of the learned in their studies, and the plain facts of life. Even the New Testament may be read with a stupid and unfeeling mind.

A book by itself, Homer or Virgil, will not save a literature, though it may be the seed of its revival. There have been times when a book, even the New Testament, could hardly by itself have saved the faith.

3. Doubtless, Almighty God might, if He had so willed, have left the witness of His salvation to the safeguard of great truths, once for all presented to the world, and enshrined in the most sacred of books. It would not have been lost to us. Great schools and systems of thought are thus perpetuated: the higher unwritten laws of morality and conscience have no other keeper than the general recognition of society. And there are those who hold that in this way only has God provided for the transmission of His revealed truth to the individuals who embrace it. But if it were so, multitudes of us would be in a very different position from what we are, as regards our knowledge and our faith. And He has not so ordered things. He has not simply sent His Truth into the world, disembodied and a wandering stranger, to find such hospitality and

home as any chance entertainer might offer, among the crowds of the busy and the indifferent. He has not trusted simply to man's deep need of that Truth—to the attraction of her amazing disclosures, the force of her doctrines, the certainty of her records. He has committed them to a body of living men, renewed without intermission and spread over the world, who have staked everything on the doctrines being real, and the book true. He has created, organized, ordained to continuous corporate existence, a great communion and fellowship, unlike anything else in the world, the purpose of whose existence is that it may not only record, but in its measure embody, reflect, realize, communicate, that Divine life and character, which this earth once saw in its perfection. He created for this end a new and public institution—not only the apostolate of the early times, but, to last through all the days of man, the Christian Church. Between the first days and ours, the great unbroken chain is the Christian Church.

The Christian Church, we must confess it, has served her Master but ill. And we, here on earth, can see how poorly and imperfectly she has fulfilled her trust. We can see how, with the example of the Jewish Church before her, she has fallen into yet lower depths of corruption and shame. We can see with what criminal lightness she has allowed her purity to be soiled; her unity, once and again, to be shattered, sacrificed to the pride and wrath of one age, to the indifference and helplessness and prejudice of the next. We can see, even now, how meanly and partially that mind of Christ which she was created to embody and keep up in the world has been realized in her. What, indeed, will that history, with all our self-conceit and self-glorification on all sides, look like at the Judgement-seat of our Lord? Christians may well be content to suffer whatever shame comes on them in their generation, at the feet of that Divine Master, to whom for so long they have been so unlike. But for all this, the Christian Church, in all ages, over all the world,

cannot choose but accomplish the purpose for which it was set up. Through all sins and follies and darkness, it is the public witness to the world that Jesus Christ has come, and *who* He is, and *what* He has done. It cannot help being so. It cannot help it, that the very reason of its existence is that He was born and died for us, and that this supreme act of God's love should pass into human life, and be for ever before the eyes of men, not as a past and far off event, but as an ever-present, ever-living source of hope and help, like the everlasting goodness and power of God. It cannot help, I say, the place and the reality which it gives to Jesus Christ. It reads His Incarnation in its Scriptures. It confesses and glorifies it in its Creeds. It worships Him, God and Man, the Crucified, the Risen, at God's right hand, yet ever with us, in its perpetual prayer. It claims His gift and power for its ministers. It owns His presence in its Sacraments. Baptism, the gate of grace, repairs and replaces the living generations which form the Church. The Eucharist, every morn-

ing that the sun rises on the earth, holds up, east and west, north and south, as it has held up, in spite of all abuses, age after age, His Cup and His Passion, and His mercy to mankind. If its preachers are silent, yet Liturgy and Office proclaim His work. All that is characteristic of it, form and usage, rule and tradition, witness to Him. The sense of what He *was* and *is*, is imbedded alike in its awful or majestic solemnities, and in the charities of the humblest homes—is with us in the nursery, is with us in the hour of death. It witnesses to Him, even where in works it denies Him. And it does not always in works deny Him. Along the line of that history, which is often so mournful and so disappointing, shine forth continuously lives and works and characters, such as the world never sees elsewhere, which in their measure *do* reflect His lineaments; which do really bring into human life, and carry on in earnest, the principles which they have learned from Him, and which by doing so "renew the face" of human society. And make what sad abatement

truth may require, yet the Christian Church has never lost the power of self-correction and recovery. It is the great power for righteousness in the world. It has not ceased, it never in the worst days wholly ceased, to be the teacher, the converter, the consoler, of those thousands who had on earth no other friend. In its worst days, it never let the faith die. It never let man's hope be extinguished. Even in its inconsistencies, in the contrasts between its words and practice, it never lets the world forget the name and claims of Jesus Christ.

We are so accustomed to take for granted what we hear of the Christian Church, it so surrounds us like the air we breathe, that we do not always feel the wonder and greatness of the institution—that it was a distinct order and creation of God, that it is conceivable that things should have been ordered differently. Many people think they were. It is one of the fashions of the day to oppose Christ, conceived, it is said, more justly and portrayed more truly by individual inquiry

and thought, to the belief about Him which has come down in the Christian Church. Such attempts can only take their place among other individual ventures: they can expect no fuller recognition. But the Church, whose history is as traceable as any national history, which, split up and damaged by the storms of many ages, yet shows a continuous and successive existence from the very first—whose unity in its belief about Jesus Christ is as clear and certain as its divisions about other things, is not a question or a theory, but a palpable and public certainty in the history of mankind, not something which we think or imagine, but something which *is*. So God willed it. He willed that that Body, created for the transmission, in real and ever renewed vitality, of his redemption, should take its place among the great recognized unquestionable facts of our condition here. He willed, I say, that the Christian Church—that is, successive generations of men in whom the knowledge and faith of Jesus Christ were embodied and in measure owned as realities of life—

should answer to the primary acknowledged phenomena of human society; that it should be on such a scale, of such permanence, so independent of individual will or character or fortune, so vast, and in spite of shock and disaster, so stable—so various in outward form with one unchanging end—as to rank later with the greatest of these phenomena. Such a great fact is the state, the political organization of civil society, of a nation and a fatherland. Some of us will remember the words in which the loftiest English teacher of political wisdom described it—"the mode of existence decreed to a permanent body composed of transitory parts, wherein, by the disposition of a stupendous wisdom, moulding together the vast incorporation of the human race, the whole, at one time, is never old, or middle-aged, or young, but, in a condition of unchangeable constancy, moves on through the varied tenor of perpetual decay, fall, renovation and progression." He bids us see in it a high "partnership in all good things, in every virtue, in all perfection; and as the ends of

such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership, not only between those who are living, but between those who are dead, and those who are to be born." The state, civil society, was in the world before Jesus Christ came. Since Jesus Christ has come, there has been in the world, over against this venerable name and reality of the state, a new fact of the same order in the system of the world—more sacred, even, in origin, and more far-reaching in destiny, but like it in its reality and its high greatness; with its solid, substantial centre of daily business and familiar function, which all real things have, with its outskirts of baffling mystery and indistinctness, which all high things have—the Catholic, undying society and communion of the Christian Church.

This—with all that it comprehends, all that it brings with it, all that it gives us—is the link which binds us to the first days: that historic body and company of living human souls, who lived and died as they did, who thought and felt and spoke and

acted publicly and privately as they did, because Jesus Christ was born at Bethlehem and died on the Cross and rose again from the dead; whose outward visible policy was framed, whose inward rules and principles were accepted, because He had been here; which has exhibited for nineteen centuries, in broken yet real light, the traces in human character of His matchless goodness: which has guarded and read His Scriptures, not as the record of things past and absent, but as the living Gospel of a living Teacher and Saviour; which has given to a practical and exacting world, doubtful of things unseen and incredulous of things future, so many pledges, and so continuously and so long, that it is in earnest in its witness to Him. May we never forget, in this *our* time and day, our partnership and share in this great witness! Others will carry it on if we do not. Every service in this place, every Christmas and Easter that we keep, is part of it. But what we each of us have much to think of is, that we may share the blessings, which, in our degree, we convey

onwards to the world whether we will or not: that the inward eye of our soul may be opened to see the things which by our gathering together to-day we are declaring to men; that in that overwhelming scene of God's compassion to mankind, which the Gospel sets before our eyes, we may be touched with something of the love and the truth, and of the lowliness of Jesus Christ—brought so near to us, made for us so real, we may catch something of the spirit of the angels' song, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will towards men."

THE
DESIRE OF ALL NATIONS.

IV.

THE DESIRE OF ALL NATIONS.

"For thus saith the Lord of Hosts—Yet once, it is a little while, and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land: And I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come . . ."—HAGGAI ii. 6, 7.

IN these wonderful words, in which an apostle, writing the Epistle to the Hebrews, reads the announcement of the final changes of the world, we read also the announcement of the greatest event and change which its history has yet seen. These awful images of universal disturbance are not too terrible to express the magnitude of that reversal of the condition and prospects of the world, which was made by the coming into it of the Eternal Word made flesh, Man among men. But it not only speaks of tremendous changes:

both as first delivered by the prophet, and then as pointed forward by the apostle to the end of all things, it announces the fulfilment of the longings and the hopes of mankind. The apostle promises this fulfilment in that "kingdom which cannot be moved." The prophet promises it *even here, in time. Even to us in the flesh,* in our sin, our mortality, "the desire of all nations" is promised.

The announcement, if we will think of what it implies, is, even among the wonderful things prophesied of the Messiah, a singular and strange one. Strange, I mean, viewed simply in itself—not strange, for what can be so, to those who see in it the fore-knowledge of Him who beholds all things from end to end, and who was revealing His purpose—but strange as a fact in the history of man. Strange, inexplicably astonishing, in proportion as we leave out of sight the Divine element of the prophecy, and lay stress on the human. For is it not most strange, most astonishing, that in that corner of the world, in that imperfect stage of intercourse and sym-

pathy among peoples, any one, at a merely natural level of insight or of enthusiasm, should have admitted into his mind and proclaimed the idea of one, who should be "the desire of all nations": of one, who should be, not merely the king and emperor of the world, the attraction, the loadstone of mankind? Is it not strange that he should not only have conceived the idea, but ventured to predict that it should be realized? Is it not one of those amazing anticipations of things to come, to which no one ever rose, out of the limits of the people of Israel—of which no record exists except in the Bible? What loftiest and most forward-looking spirit, in India, in Greece, in Persia, ever saw rise before him the vision of a character, a real Person, who should be the centre and form of the affections and hopes of all mankind, the heart to which all hearts yearned, the moral beauty, the unearthly excellence drawing to it all human wills, the love in which all longings after good were satisfied—"the desire of all nations"?

He has come, and we understand it.

Let us spend a few moments on the thought. How does that awful and gracious Person whom we worship and in whom we trust, answer to the prophet's description of Him, "the desire of all nations"?

1. He is, to begin with, the fulfilment of man's longing for an ideal and an example of life. The life we know, the life we lead, the character which we are conscious of in ourselves, the rule of conduct which in fact we carry out, the moral spectacle presented in society nowadays, all this falls far short of what we conceive of, both as right and as possible—falls far short of what, when we are most ourselves, we are impatient to see. The spell of custom which binds us fast in fact, does not bind our imaginations and our wishes. What we do not see, what we cannot find in ourselves or in others, we do not give over thinking about, with despairing perhaps, yet with eager and longing hearts. What is the best art and the best fiction, what is the poetry which has the most permanent hold on the human mind, what is half of all history and biography, but attempts

in various ways to satisfy this craving hunger of the soul for goodness and excellence which, it is sure, exists, but which experience refuses to show us—aspirations which insist on believing what they can never find—efforts to grasp something too fugitive for real human life—but without which real human life would be too poor and mean—the natural counter-charms to its disappointment and its failures? Who would not have said beforehand, that the search and craving, though most ennobling and sustaining, was one of those which never here could reach its object, and must go on indefinitely and without term? But He has come, the "desire of all nations," and that longing after the perfect exemplar of human character has found a reality in which it can be at rest. One, who is as far above us in goodness—as man—as the heaven is above the earth, yet one whose every motion and shade of goodness our human hearts respond to and understand: one before whose Holiness all that the earth has ever seen of heroic or of saintly reveals at once its incomplete-

ness and may not be named; yet one, who through all that belongs to man's weakest state and deepest humiliation, his temptations, his sorrows, his mortality, passed in the Divine Majesty of His goodness, yet with unshrinking sympathy and closest brotherhood. This is He whom no human imagination could have prefigured or dared to hope for, yet in whom eighteen centuries have recognized that Living Pattern they would otherwise vainly seek, one who fulfilled man's craving after moral perfectness in the most unlikely and most unexpected manner, yet who *has* fulfilled it completely and permanently—one whom pride and sensuality cannot welcome, yet before whom even the proud and sensual are forced to bow, and to own that the true law and secret of human life are not with them. Alike in what He was, and in what He was not and refused to be on earth, in His unapproachable heights, in His unutterable lowlinesses, in His distance from us and His fellowship with us, in His wrath and in His gentleness and meekness, in the unclouded simplicity of His truth,

and in the tenderness and freedom of His compassion and love, in His power and in His weakness the human heart has owned its Lord and its Pattern, the perfect reality which it longed for without knowing all it sought, the Living Law which embraced the whole range of its duties and its needs, Him whom all nations, amid all the differences of race and time, desired and could delight in.

2. But man had other longings. Say what people will, argue and theorize as they please, there remains deep in the soul of man—often buried, overlaid, and out of sight, but inextinguishable in its vitality and power—the sense of sin, the consciousness of the irrevocable and mysteriously grave consequences of having done wrong. *Here*, men can ask and find forgiveness among each other: but who can tell them of forgiveness, or point out its way, from that unseen, unapproachable Being, whom they feel to be their Judge, and whose law, their conscience witnesses to them, is the Law of Right? Who can reconcile them once more, and perhaps so late, with that

Eternal order which they have broken in their self-will? Who can restore the peace of heart which they have thrown away? What shall be done, what can they hope for, about the punishment of their untruth, their impurity, their selfish desertions, their traitorous unfaithfulnesses to right, to love, to duty? Who shall break the chain of evil custom? Who shall kill the seeds and extirpate the roots of the moral maladies which are destroying them, and bring back whiteness and health and power to the soul? Long had men searched their own hearts and questioned nature about these things. Long had they made guesses, the wildest and the saddest, about the answer to these awful doubts. Dimly, in one corner of the world, were they allowed to see some light. But the taking away of guilt, the healing and renovation of the moral creature, were among the things which age after age they eagerly sought for, and could not find. Then, in the midst of that sinning and conscience-stricken world, appeared One, upon whom the scorching flame of sin had never

passed. Separate from our terrible inheritance of guilt, He threw Himself into the closest contact with sin, and into fellowship with sinners. Their terrors and their misery, their shame, their overthrow, their penalty, their longings and their despair—He made them all His own concern, as if indeed they were His own. He looked for and He found the lost. The dead life, which had perished for the soul, He called back again in new fulness. "Thy sins be forgiven thee," was the new and awful consolation that issued with authority from the lips of that "Friend of publicans and sinners." Who could have anticipated, among the nations of the world, one bringing to mankind such a message, and enabling them to believe His word? Was it not indeed the presence of one, who was, in truth, the secret, unnamed, "desire of all nations"? And when they came to see, as they did afterwards, on what all this rested and what He was purposing all along—when in His infinite purity and perfectness, in the unsearchable depths of His Divine love, in His Divine, unbounded

patience, He descended the downward path of defeat and condemnation and agony, till it led Him to the place where the vilest criminals died in shame and torture, to die with them; when besides the appalling spectacle itself, with its apparent subversion of all moral foundations, with its unspeakable horrors and unspeakable tendernesses, men learned its meaning—when in it they were made to see both the consequence of their evil doing and the price of their redemption and forgiveness; the just giving His life for the unjust, the sacrifice for the sins of the whole world—then, indeed, a spring of love was touched and opened in the heart of man, a new love, full of pity, full of self-reproach, full of adoring devotion, such as the heart of man had never known, could not have known, in itself before. Those universal fears about sin were more than justified, were made infinitely more intense, but those universal longings for pardon were more than answered. When that purest, most perfect, tenderest goodness stood silent and uncomplaining in the

depths of His bitter Passion, that sinners might be forgiven and have hope—when from those outstretched arms on the Cross the compassion and peace of God were given to the world—an object was set before the affections of men, surprising, subduing, captivating, transporting them, which expanded and raised to new capacities their power of loving, their power of joyful self-sacrifice, their power of hoping, their power of worship. The Desire of all nations, in His purity and goodness alone, drew all hearts unto Him. Lifted up on the Cross, to give His life a ransom for the world, He not only drew all hearts to Him, He broke them, He melted them, He made them desire and rejoice in what it had never before entered into human hearts to imagine of what God had meant for men.

3. And this was not all. If there is anything which men long to know, it is, the meaning and end of their existence—to know what is to become of them, why they are here, what account is to be taken at last of all that is done and goes on

here. Who has the key of our real destiny? Who can tell us the purpose of this our life, so wonderful, so vain? Who can tell us why, since we live, we have to die? And among the secrets beyond the grave there is one, which man almost claims to have told him—he claims, in the name of that conscience which he owns, that, after this confused scene, in which the eternal law of right is daily witnessed to and daily broken, there should be a judgement: he asks, with untold fears, yet passionately and obstinately, he asks to be judged. He asks, he surmises, he trusts his presentiment; but what he longs for is to be certain. His belief in God, provided that he patiently thought of what it implied, itself involved the answer to all these questions—the God who calls Himself the God of men, the God of the saints, is not the God of the dead but the God of the living: is not the God of our idle and vain world, made for nought, but of a serious and true one. But now has anticipation, the most confident, been

exchanged for knowledge. He has come, He who has torn asunder "the covering cast over all people, and the veil that was spread over all nations." The world has seen in it Him, who is the Resurrection and the Life. The world has seen in it Him, who shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead. The world has seen in it One, who when He went up to the right hand of the Father, took with Him there, together with our human nature, the deepest interest, the meaning, the everlasting destiny of human life. The world has seen in it its Ruler and Eternal King, and knows for certain, amid its anarchy and its vanity, that the kingdom of God is come, and is over all things. Man eagerly longed to know his God, the invisible, the unsearchable, to know *what he was* to his God, to know if ever he should behold His face. The "desire of all nations" is come; and it is written of Him,—"The word was God . . . and the word was made flesh and dwelt among us—and we beheld His glory, the glory as

of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. . . . Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed on us that we should be called the sons of God. Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be. But we know, that when He shall appear, we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is."

And so has been realized in this world in which we are living that wonderful and Divine idea—of one of ourselves—infinitely more than what we are, and yet more truly one of us—being to all mankind, to high and low, to the greatest and the meanest, the point to which all hearts turn for hope and peace, the centre of their highest affections, the ground of all their trust. That which all longed for, knowingly, or unconsciously, and unconfessed, in all times, under all conditions, of human existence, a living image of stainless righteousness, a healer of sin and wrong, a conqueror of nature and death, a judge of the world, a restorer of the lost union between human souls and

God—this birthday of the Lord has given us. Ever the same, from His cradle of humiliation, through His cup of misery, up to the right hand of the Father; ever the same through the changes of all the ages, "yesterday, to-day, and for ever;" combining, as no one else can combine, the sweet innocence of the child, with the man's severity and wrath, together with an infinite tenderness surpassing the love of woman. His is the Name which draws to it the sympathies of us all, the spell which in spite of ourselves binds us all together into one, which in days of hope and gladness, and still more in the waste and dreariness and emptiness in which our life is consumed, chains down our restlessness, and shames our fretfulness into patience! That one Divine Person fills the vacancies of men's hearts in times the most different, in stages of society the most remotely separated. That one object makes their thoughts and affections wider, and then abundantly fills them to the full —the "desire of all nations," "to bond and free," to Greek and barbarian, to

prince and peasant, to the scholar and to the child, to us "the heirs of all the ages," and to the undeveloped natures in the isles of the sea, in whom conscience, painfully breaking through its clouds, begins dimly to show them what it is to belong to the race into which the Son of God was born. He receives, he shelters us all within his embracing arms—Christ the Consoler, Christ the Restorer, Christ the Refuge, Christ the Corner Stone of all humanity, of the Father's Eternal Temple of human souls, the Judge whom we welcome though He is to judge us. O King of the nations and their deep desire, the true desire of all who live, raise up Thy power and come among us, and with Thy great might succour us. Come and save the poor creatures, whom Thou hast called into life out of the dust: come and save those for whom Thou wast born and crucified: come and save the miserable sinners, whom here Thou daily comfortest with Thy forgiveness, and whom now Thou gladdenest with Thy Holy Nativity, whom one day Thou must judge.

THE
WEAKNESS OF GOD.

IV.

THE WEAKNESS OF GOD.

"The weakness of God is stronger than men."—1 Cor. i. 25.

No lesson is more emphatically taught in the Bible from end to end than this. No lesson is more natural and more to be expected, in a revelation of the mind or doings of the Almighty: for to Him, from whose will is everything, and in whose hand is everything, the visible universe and the infinitely greater universe beyond, strength and weakness, as we know them and compare them, can have no meaning. They can be the different names for different forms and modes of His working: how can anything, whatever it looks, be weak, which comes from the Eternal

Hand? How can one act exceed another in strength, when each is the act of Omnipotence? Strength and weakness are differences of the things of time, of things created. But it has pleased Him that when His dealings enter this world of time and mortality, they should wear the shapes which belong to time, they should to the outward eye submit themselves to the limits of our experience. He does things before us, and we see in them the signs of His Power: He does other things, and we see in them what we call weakness. It has pleased Him, the Infinite, the Everlasting, who has so wonderfully joined Himself to the thoughts and the hearts of men, that what He has disclosed to us of His working with us should reflect those differences with which we are so familiar here: that we should see in them, here weakness, there strength. But the Apostle reminds us, resuming the teaching of the whole of Scripture, in words which none but an Apostle could dare to use, that the weakness of God is stronger than men, and the foolishness of

God is wiser than men. It is a lesson which all times have needed, and certainly none more than our own, in which the belief in human wisdom and human strength is so widespread, so exclusive, so conscious of its grounds, so impatient of rivalry. On this day, when our thoughts go back to what, as on this day, began to be—of the disclosures of God's purpose, of what He was to do for man—the force of the Apostle's bold words comes home to us—"the weakness of God"—"the weakness of God is stronger than men." We commemorate to-day the strangest of surprises, the most inconceivable of condescensions, the most utter and most gracious of revolutions in the thoughts and prospects of mankind. We behold the most helpless weakness, mute, obscure, unheeded, powerless: the new-born child. And that weakness was the union of the Creator with the creature, of the Eternal Word with flesh, of God with man: the realization of that unutterable mystery, which ancient prophets could only express in language which, till the event, seemed

paradox and riddle: the beginning of that wondrous Presence in the Church on earth which was to make all things new, which was to give a new life and a new righteousness to a fallen nature, which was to fulfil to the uttermost the longings and the hopes of man, and the counsels of God in making him.

I. "The weakness of God is stronger than men." It has been so, as seen in the history of mankind, since the day when the Eternal Son came in His humiliation to visit us, and grew to manhood out of a little child. If ancient Israel could look back upon a history of wonders, the Christian Church can disengage from the confusions and clouds of her eighteen centuries a chain of events, of achievements, of deliverances, as astonishing, as incalculable, as signally marked by the hand of God. And it springs from the cradle at Bethlehem.

1. It began in the humble and unavailing appeal of that weakness to the faith, the hopes, the knowledge of the elder Church. But priest and scribe, keepers and inter-

preters of the Oracles of God, could see in their prophecies no such anticipation of weakness and obscurity; in their own hearts, in their deep and traditional pride, they shrank back from the possibility of such a fulfilment of prophecy. God's strength, God's visible glory, God's triumphant kingdom, they would have recognized: but not His weakness. Weakness, though it were God's, weakness such as that of the Virgin's babe in the manger, weakness, though signs from heaven and signs on earth illuminated it with their startling gleams, and though these accompanying signs had awakened the interest and questionings of Gentiles, could not in the judgement of Jews be suitable to the promised King and Restorer of Israel. They took no heed; doubtless they took for granted that there was nothing to inquire about or to know. It was left to the faith and courage of the heathen travellers from the East to venture to do homage to the helpless Child, to honour the Epiphany of the King of Kings. It was left to two unknown and pure-hearted

families in Judaea and in Galilee, to preserve the memory of those most wondrous of years, in which in the midst of weakness, God was revealing Himself. "His mother kept all these sayings in her heart." To the weakness of the Child, succeeded the weakness of the wandering, homeless Master, the weakness of Him who was the despised and hated by the great and wise, the weakness of one whose claims were indignantly rejected by authority, and whom the highest and most venerable opinion of the time denounced as a seducer and false prophet, a friend of publicans and sinners: the weakness of one whose life began in the inn stable, and ended in the shame and ruin of the Cross. That was what to lookers on seemed weakness without excuse in its pretensions, weakness which must and ought to fail. And confronting it and condemning it, was a religion of the loftiest claims and the most rooted strength; a religion of ages, a religion of truth, a religion of God; a religion built upon the highest of sanctions and the greatest of

laws, on the most glorious promises and hopes; a religion proved by the fiercest of trials, by signal deliverance, by terrible chastisement, and so firmly established in men's hearts and habits that not death itself could move them. That great religion despised the weakness of the little Child, rejected the homeless Master, crucified the defenceless reprover. It was the victory of a majestic and ancient system, the easy overthrow of a hopeless attempt to change it. And what has followed? A few years passed, and that strong and ancient system perished—as a system and institution, for ever; perished, in spite of a tenacity of faith among its scattered members without example in the world. But it perished, strangely, suddenly, terribly. It was extending itself among the heathen; it might read in its prophesies the hope of being the universal religion. The faith of the Child of Bethlehem, the faith of the Crucified, the doctrine of the Cross, struck it dead; broke up its elements, appropriated and transfigured its truths, attracted by a natural affinity what

was purest and most spiritual in it, of zeal, of devotion, of hope, of charity; broke it up as the religion it had once claimed and seemed to be, as decisively as the Roman armies destroyed its Temple, and the Roman government extinguished its ritual worship. For what here seemed the weakness of Jesus of Nazareth had been indeed the Presence of the Son of God. For though He was "crucified through weakness, yet He liveth by the power of God." The weakness of the manger, the weakness of the cross, had passed on into the power of the resurrection, to the throne at the Right Hand of the Father. "The weakness of God is stronger than men."

2. And so with the great heathen world beyond. The Lord came to visit us at the moment when the greatest of heathen empires was at the summit of its greatness. No such time had been known in the world before. The haughtiest, the most irresistible of conquering states, it seemed the most reasonable, the most public spirited of polities the world had ever seen in its

ideas and aims of government. It seemed to use its irresistible strength to impose order on the world, to bind together jarring nations, to teach, as it was said, the laws of human nature to man. The heir of all experience and all thought, the ready and liberal welcomer of all culture and all wisdom, it had adapted itself to the various necessities, the prejudices, the aspirations of the nations of mankind. Its legions had conquered, that the world might share in the justice, the good sense, the largeness of its laws. It seemed the triumph and final masterpiece of all imaginable civilization. All nations seemed to lie still before it; the world rejoiced, as its writers boasted, in the "immense majesty of Roman peace": its great poets sang the wonders of an age, which had realized in sober fact the most improbable of hopes. Settled on its deep and strong foundations it seemed to have become part of the fixed order of things; its perishing was only conceivable with the perishing of all things: as long as time lasts, thought even the Christians whom it persecuted, will the Empire stand. Into

this wonderful creation and instrument of human power, the memory of whose greatness still haunts and will haunt for ever the imagination of mankind, the Child was born, its Judge, its Victim, its Destroyer. He was born when it seemed to have the greatest hold on men: when it concentrated in itself the grandeur, the fascinations, all the terrible powers and all the pleasant sins of this present world: in the hour of its profoundest security, when its future seemed most certain. It was the weakness of the "little Child," the weakness of the Founder of the kingdom of God, against the strength of Rome, and the majesty of the Caesars. The strength of Rome was merciless. The majesty of Caesar, when it conceived itself affronted, was not slow or sparing in its vengeance. The mere fear of Caesar's suspicions, the imperious jealousy of Roman authority for public order, were enough to set up the Cross, and as it was with the Head, so it was with the members. In His apostles, in His martyrs, in the company and fellowship of His saints, He was

then waging war in weakness, in suffering, in death, against that universal power, which disputed with Him the allegiance of mankind. I need not tell you who conquered. I need not tell you which in this controversy prevailed and survived, the Christian Church or the Empire which put forth its terrors to crush it. I need not tell you what, before the word, the judgement, the Right Hand of Him, whom Christians now adore as the little Child, was the fate of that Fourth Empire, that tremendous organization of earthly power, which boasted, and the world thought with reason, that it would be Eternal—"The weakness of God is stronger than men." Whether uttered by Julian or not, the despairing avowal of Imperial heathenism represented the truth—"Galilean, thou art victorious."

II. "The weakness of God is stronger than men"—so has it been seen, not only in history, but in the inward things of the soul and conscience; in the training of the soul in holiness, in truth, in purity; in the unfolding of its spiritual faculties,

in the elevation of its aims and the cleansing of its motives: in new strength, in its conflicts and new help, in its temptations: in new consolations, new hope, new peace.

There were forms of ancient morality, which feared not hard sayings and hard duties; which wanted not strength, and taught self-mastery, and aimed at what was noble and true and good. No Christian can read unmoved and without sympathy the pathetic records of heathen virtue, its wants, its efforts; how men above their fellows tried one way after another to make the world better than they found it, and could not. But they tried what was above their strength; they had no mission to put new life into the souls of men: their goodness was for themselves alone; it was barren and stopped short at its fixed bound; it was not contagious, it could not convert, its very consolations were stern and sad, and in spite of them the world remained what it was—what it was when St. Paul portrayed its terrible image. But "what the law could not do"

—the law, in the strong hands of Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius—the "weakness of God," the Gospel of the Child of Bethlehem, the Gospel of the Incarnation and the Cross, was able to do. It brought into the moral and spiritual world new ideas. It filled the souls of men with new perceptions, new powers, new ambitions, new hopes. It made them believe in the Beatitudes, and from the root of the "New Commandment" it drew forth a store of graces and sweetnesses unconceived of in the world before. From that time a new spiritual creation began among men, expanding on all sides and in new and marvellous developments, not content with its own sphere, but grasping, appropriating, transforming the elements of human nature, and moulding them after a pattern not of earth, after the likeness of the Son of God. That new thing in the world, the humiliation of Him who is our Maker and our Lord, with all its unspeakable consequences, wrought what nothing else could do. It broke up the fallow and wild ground of the human

heart. It opened in it unknown springs of joy and sorrow, of love, of enterprise, of hope. It left no doubt on the terrible certainty of sin. It taught the new discipline of penitence, and imparted the new and unknown peace of forgiveness. It made man know that there was *that* in him which in his loftiest flights he had not imagined; the gift, the blessedness, of recognizing and answering in the deepest secrets of his being, and with the utmost force of his affections, the adorable and ineffable love of his God. The words of Jesus, the compassion of Jesus, the lowliness and meekness of Jesus, the holiness of Jesus, the love of Jesus, have made of human nature, and human character and human life, a new thing. *That* has conquered, where the strongest and wisest failed: that has subdued human wills, and mastered human passions, and broken down human selfishness, and taught modesty to human intelligence, where all other charms have been unavailing, all other restraints have been laughed to scorn. And that for all time. "Heaven and

earth shall pass away," He said, "but my words shall not pass away." The words of Jesus, the person of Jesus, still do for man what they did at first. He still comforts the wretched, and tames the proud, and purifies the unclean, and turns our darkness into light. And who but He can? For "the weakness of God is stronger than men."

III. Words never more true than now; never more than now needing to be seriously and deeply thought of. For the outward aspect and temper of human society are still in strange contrast to that beginning of Christ's kingdom which, in spite of the tumult of modern life, still brings us year by year its Divine, mysterious joy. Let us in our Christmas thoughts find both comfort and warning. Comfort, I say, in these days, which outwardly are so peaceful and so orderly, and below the surface are so wild. Round us are loud voices prophesying evil to all we most love, to all that makes the hopes of man. We are scornfully and haughtily assured that we have been all along under the grossest

and most hideous of mistakes. We are confidently warned to set our house in order and seek another Gospel and another Saviour; for that the victory of the Crucified is over, and His kingdom here is coming to an end. When these terrible thoughts are upon us—and it is absolutely impossible to overrate their terribleness and appalling significance—let us remember what the manger of Bethlehem looked at, face to face with the world as it then was, face to face with Jewish zeal and Roman strength, and what, as a plain certain matter of history, has flowed from that deep abasement, and that helpless infancy. There was a Divine token on the conquests of Him who lay in the manger and suffered on the Cross; the Divine token of holiness and goodness. Other things may have contributed to those conquests; but take away that distinctive and essential element, remove that unique and all-important factor, and you cannot conceive that they could have been, or that they could have been so manifest, so wonderful, so permanent. And even now too, I make bold to say that,

amid all the cross currents which perplex intellect and disquiet society, the tendencies of goodness, of that thing which is highest and surest in this world, set all one way. They still carry thoughts and convictions and hearts to Him, who in His weakness was so strong. But if we are to draw comfort from the manger of Bethlehem, we must share something of its spirit. The manger, and that life of which it was the fore-runner and figure, was an example of the lowest outward weakness, veiling the highest conceivable moral strength. It is the strength which cares not to appear; which is too real, and too certain of itself to need attesting or acknowledgement. There is another kind of strength, which likes to make itself felt, which rejoices in putting itself forth, which glories in its power to bear down resistance, to defeat and crush: strength of will, strength of purpose, strength of word, strength of hand, strength of organization and instrument—often covering the most deplorable moral weakness, and a child's feebleness against the suggestions of meanness and cowardice,

against the temptations of passion, against the delusions of vanity. And this is the strength which in our days we are most led to admire. To our age have been given in unusual abundance the gifts of outward strength, power over nature, control over the difficulties of political and social order, and our age makes no secret how it delights in them, how it reveres and forgives the strong. We are taught in eloquent and fervent words to be the idolaters of strength: "the race," they tell us, "*is* to the swift, and the battle *is* to the strong." The temper of old Rome too often revives among us; the infection descends from the strong even to the weak and commonplace: we cultivate pride as if it were a noble thing: we exalt and revel in the exercise of scorn, in the infliction, refined or coarse, of insult, as if that was the choicest and fittest way, even for Christians, to prove the strength of their convictions—Alas! how far have we wandered, from what to-day we profess to honour, the humbleness, the simplicity, the silence, the patience, of the manger at Bethlehem. There too was strength—

strength, before which the Archangels tremble and worship: the strength of that Divine and awful love, which shrank from nothing so that it might win and save mankind; which humbled Itself in the dust before Its creatures to convince them of God's measure of what is great and high. Long before He came, uninspired wisdom had witnessed, in the most solemn and most touching ways, of the madness, and the avenging doom, of human pride. We cannot open Psalm or Prophecy, without being warned of God's judgement on the proud. At length He came to teach us what He thought, by what He did. "He hath showed strength with His arm; He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and hath exalted the humble and meek." And this He did, by being "born as at this time of a pure Virgin," and being "laid in the manger, because there was no room for them in the inn." That image remains graven for ever on the imagination, the feelings and the very eye of all Christendom. Will you not

let it have its perfect work on your hearts, your characters, your judgements? Could we use without a check the world's standard of its honour, if we gave the due place in our thoughts to that union of the lowliest abasement with our maker's infinite sympathy, with absolute Holiness, with the fullness of the Godhead? May it not help us—in our temptation, in our despondency, when in our business, our conflicts, our successes, proud swelling thoughts come over us, and words of insolence and provocation rise to our lips—if we go back in thought along the stream of Christian history till we see it beginning, with all its wonders and its blessings, with its unexhausted powers, with its deep and manifold sanctities, beginning in the village stable where Jesus Christ was born;—and then think, what has proved to be, even in this world of force and sense and material strength, the power of lowliness, the power of reality and truth that lies hid beneath it. For "the weakness of God is stronger than men." Let us behold in that manger-cradle what it really is, the throne of Him

who made the world, the refuge and the judgement-seat of man, the royal seal of the everlasting word, "dwelling among us full of grace and truth." Its triumphs are no unknown or doubtful thing. Our eyes have seen, and our fathers' before us, its victory over what is mightiest and most unconquerable among man's pride, man's superstition, man's self-will, selfishness, and passion, man's slavery to the present and to custom. It has conquered. It will conquer again. *There*, in the presence of that little Child, let us learn to bear the shows of adverse greatness which oppress us, to behold with undaunted and unfascinated eyes, the threatening floods of ungodliness, the rising tides of desolating unbelief. *There*, let us learn to possess our souls in patience; and in quietness and confidence to bide the end. There let us study and learn the Apostolic lesson, that indeed gives "glory to God in the highest," and brings peace on earth, the peace passing all understanding, to "men of good will" —"in all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in

love, endeavouring to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace . . . and be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake, hath forgiven you."

THE
BIRTHDAY OF CHRIST.

VI.

THE BIRTHDAY OF CHRIST.

"And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord."—LUKE ii. 10, 11.

TO-DAY we celebrate what in the notice prefixed to the collect in our Prayer-book, is called "The Birthday of Christ." The Birthday of Christ!—a name which connects with the familiar associations of home life the opening of the heavens to human hope, the inconceivable grace and condescension of Almighty God, the beginning of a state of things on earth, in which God our Maker has united Himself for ever with humankind. Let us devote a few minutes to the obvious lessons of the Birthday of Christ.

What are the lessons of the Birthday of Christ?

I. The lesson of *reverence*. When we think of the event commemorated ~~to-day~~, we are between two dangers. It may have become a mere name and word to us, conventionally accepted, conventionally repeated, but conveying no such living meaning as, say, the last great public event, or the last birth, or marriage, or death in our own circle; or it may have come with a fullness of meaning which has overwhelmed and confounded our thoughts, and we ask, as we well may, "How can such things be?—Almighty God made a little child, the Infinite and Everlasting, born in human flesh, born to die!" It would be overwhelming, indeed, if we were creatures of simple intellect; but we are creatures who, besides—yes, *above* intellect, are endowed with a nature which knows what it is to love, to venerate, to rejoice, to adore; which finds, not in its intellect, but in its affections, its highest conceivable ideal. Take in this thought, that God, above all that we can possibly be or think,

is love — love immeasurable and inexhaustible, love most serious, love most generous, love most self-sacrificing, and then we can dare to face the mystery of the Incarnation, of God made man for the undying love of man, without being crushed and confounded under the weight of its strangeness. "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son." That is intelligible, that is worthy of God, if God is infinite, unstinted Love; and who can wonder that He, who is so far above our thoughts and ways, should have pushed His love so far? But, surely, such love is too great, too awful to be before us, as it is this day, without our being fully conscious of it and alive to all its significance. Time, and business, and the world wear out the impressions of what is really meant by such mighty words as "God," and "Jesus Christ," and "Redemption," and "Everlasting Life." We sit but too easy to them; our thoughts about them come to be shallow and faint; we forget them, and forget ourselves, when we talk about them, when we say our prayers. Oh, if

we could but have the true and living idea and impression of what this day means—of what happened on this day! Who can fathom its marvels? Who can adequately bow down and adore its graciousness, its tenderness, the Divine majesty of the love which for us surrendered all, for us accepted all. The day is here, to call on us to think about it. Let us learn for future use to take a true measure of the unspeakable majesty and living goodness with which we have to deal. Let us learn its lesson of *reverence.*

II. And next, the lesson of *purity.* We all know, when the Lord our Saviour came among us, amid what innocence, with what purity and holiness He came. It was, as it must have been, the mind and atmosphere of heaven, coming with all the height of their sanctities, into human flesh. Is not this a spectacle to make us stop and be thoughtful, and consider our own experience of life and society? Whatever our experience is, at least the experience of ages has taught mankind, that there is no harder lesson for most of them than

the lesson of real purity. The hardness has varied in degree and circumstances; and something less than the real, genuine virtue, yet paying it the tribute of respect, may have been more or less frequently in fashion. But it has antagonists too mighty to struggle with to be ever a widely cultivated or an easy virtue. Our own day, our own state of society—whether worse or better than other times, we, at least, probably cannot judge—has its own special and characteristic dangers. There is much that ought to be otherwise in what passes current and is allowed in literature, in art, in dress; much that is questionable or more than questionable in point of modesty and what fits a Christian;—much of it, no doubt, thoughtless, much of it unintentional, but much, also, deliberate, inexcusable. Let us pass from things which fashion and custom do not mind, but which do lower the tone and health of soul and character, which often tempt and corrupt it; let us turn away our eyes from what, however captivating and charming, is dangerous to know and look at, to the little Child and

His mother. Let us learn there the lesson of strength, of manliness—for purity means manliness—of abhorrence of evil; let us learn in the vividness of His Presence, the lesson of that great Beatitude: "Blessed are the pure in heart; for they shall see God."

III. The lesson of *humility*. The human mind cannot conceive any surrender of place and claims, any willing lowliness and self-forgetfulness, any acceptance of the profoundest abasement, comparable to that which is before us in the birth, and the circumstances of the birth, of Jesus Christ. The measure of it is the measure of the distance between the Creator and the creature, and the creature in the most unregarded, most uncared-for condition, helpless, unknown, of no account for the moment amid the millions of men whom He had made, and whose pride, and loftiness, and ambition filled His own world. There He was for the time, the youngest, the weakest, the poorest of them all; and He came thus, to show what God thinks of human pride, of human ambition, of human loftiness. He came

thus, to show what God thinks of those who cannot be happy without having the first places and the chief rooms, and are miserable when others are put before them. He came to show what God thinks of those who have high thoughts about themselves, and who claim that their own high thoughts should be reflected in what others think of them, and in the way in which others treat them. He came thus, to show us what God thinks of those jealousies, and envyings, and heart-burnings, about all sorts of things, great and small, in public and in private, which are so familiar to the experience of us all. He came to show us what God thinks of those who are uneasy when men do not praise them, and who think life a failure unless it exalts them, and brings with it its own proportion of honour and flattery. He came thus, to show how God despises the untruth of self-esteem, the untruth of flattery, and to teach how little the outward shows of our present condition answer to *that* which, in reality and truth, it *is worth while* for a living soul, an

immortal being, *to be*. Thought cannot imagine, language cannot tell, the greatness, and glory, and riches, and dominion, and power, which are His, who, to deliver man, did not abhor the Virgin's womb—to what immensities His eye reached, what infinite multitudes in heaven and earth His hand fed, while yet He was here, "wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." Who of us before such a sight can dare to be proud? Who of us can venture on the falsehoods of self-conceit? Who of us but must feel that the truest dignity of our human nature, must be found in "all lowliness and meekness," in the sincerity of a true and sober measure of ourselves, in a genuine and unaffected humbleness of mind and heart and daily behaviour?

"A silent Teacher, Lord,
Thou bid'st us not refuse
To bear what flesh would have us shun,
To shun what flesh would choose.

"Our sinful pride to cure
With that pure love of Thine,
O be Thou born within our hearts,
Most Holy Child Divine."

IV. And next, it is the lesson of *not putting our trust in the arm of flesh.* Contrast the Birthday of Christ with the purpose of His coming, to reform, to conquer, to restore the world. Contrast it with the announcements of prophecy, with the promised certainties of His kingdom and reign, with the natural expectations of human experience. Of all that mighty order which was to be, of all that overwhelming task and work before Him, here were the first steps, in the lowliest paths of human life. God with us indeed! God made man! God worshipped and witnessed by the Host of Heaven! The very perfection of sinless human nature, of the holiness and loveliness of human character; but to human eyes, the humblest, the meekest, the most defenceless of human beings. He it was to whom was committed this great work of God; He it was who, in His own Divine way, brought it to pass. Not in the way which men understood, not in the way which they anticipated, not by forces and measures suggested by their experience,

but in the exact way of God's perfect holiness and righteousness, He began and He finished the work which the Father gave Him to do. And in the utter unlikelihood of His success, He has left us a lesson which this day reveals. In doing His work, and in doing our own work, we are often sorely tempted to depart from His footsteps. In doing His work, in maintaining His cause, in fighting for His kingdom, it has always been too common for men to think, that all the same means are available which are used in human enterprises, that success depended on the same conditions, that it was impossible without employing weapons which were not like His. They have trusted to energy, to strength, to sagacity; they have distrusted the power of single-hearted obedience, of prayer, of patience, of faith, of self-sacrifice, of goodness; they have thought it weak to be over-scrupulous; they have forgotten how far beyond the reach and touch of human power are the fortunes of the kingdom of the Most Holy. And so in doing *our own* work, it is hard

for us all not to do the opposite to what our Master did; hard not to trust to the arm and the ways of flesh, instead of trusting with our eyes shut the path of duty, truth, and obedience. The trader has before him the way of unflinching honesty, or the way in which custom and opinion allow him to take advantage and make shorter cuts to profit and increased business; *which* path will he take? Will he have faith in principle, and perhaps wait, perhaps lose; or will he do as others do, and, highly respecting principle, yet forget it at the critical moment? The young man entering into life wishes to get on. Will he trust to what he is, to his determination to do right, to straightforwardness and simplicity, to God's blessing, or what God has blessed and promised to bless; or will he push his fortunes by readiness to appear what he is not, by selfishness, by man pleasing, by crooked paths and questionable compliances? The boy has to do his lessons and satisfy his teacher. Will he be content to appear no cleverer than he is, to be conscientious, diligent,

faithful, dutiful, whatever comes of it; or will he be tempted to save himself labour and trouble by shorter and easier ways which many will tell him of, and gain credit for what he has no right to? Here, to warn us, to teach us, to comfort us, in all our varied conditions and employments, we have the beginning of Christ's conquest of the world. And this was to the end what it had been in the beginning. "By the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armour of righteousness on the right hand and on the left;"—these weapons dispensed with all human appliances; these are the instruments by which our Master wrought. "By honour and dishonour, by evil report and good report; as deceivers, and yet true; . . . as dying, and, behold, we live; . . . as sorrowful, yet alway rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things;"—here is the picture of the way in which His servants fulfilled His will and His work. And the footsteps of this great progress begin from the cradle of the Nativity.

V. Lastly, the lesson of *gladness and joy*. We must, I suppose, often feel—it must be so in the average course of life with some or other of us—that we are hardly in tune for the rejoicing of Christmas. The rush of gladness which it brings with it through a whole people, through all the wide realms of Christendom, deepens to many by sharp contrast the bitterness of a recent bereavement, the sorrowful watch round a hopeless sick bed. Or it may be, while we are saluting our Lord's coming with hymns and carols of childlike exultation, and repeating the angelic welcome to the Prince of Peace, that by a terrible irony the heavens around us are black with storm and danger; that great nations are involved in the horrible death-struggle of war; that day by day men are perishing by every form of carnage, and suffering every form of pain, and that by each other's hands. Such Christmases we have known before, such a Christmas we are passing through now. We almost ask whether it is not mockery to think of gladness. Yet it *is* in place;

yet Christmas claims it from us. Those great gospel songs which heralded the Incarnation of the Son of God, the Magnificat, the Benedictus, the song of the angels, were themselves but the prelude to the life of the "Man of Sorrows." They are followed immediately by Rachel weeping for her children at Bethlehem, and the flight from the sword of Herod. But yet in those dreadful days on earth, of blood and pain and triumphant iniquity, there was peace in heaven and the joy of the angels; for amid the clouds and storm of the conflict which men could not see through, the angels knew *who* was conquering. He is conquering and to conquer still. All falsehood, all cruelty, all selfishness, all oppression and tyranny, are to fall before Him. Amid the darkness of our life, the hope of man is still on Him, as fixed and sure as ever it was. He will not disappoint man of his hope. To-day bids us look up, in spite of everything, and lift up our heads. Come what may, nothing can efface the mark which Christmas has made in the rolls of time—

"for us men and for our salvation, *He* was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man." Let us, in spite of noise and turmoil, of fear or of sorrow, give *that* its due place in our hearts. Let not private trouble, nor the march of the world and the crash of its conflicting powers, drown its holy call. It speaks to us, if we will but listen; it speaks as it did on that first Birthday of our Lord, of the "peace beyond all understanding;" of the "joy unspeakable and full of glory," with which apostles, and saints, and martyrs went through life and death to God.

Let us receive deep into our heart of hearts its lessons: its lesson of *reverence;* its lesson of *purity;* its lesson of *humility;* its lesson of *not trusting in the arm of flesh*—in anything more than truth and goodness and the will of God; its lesson of thankful and adoring *joy*. And may He who was once presented veiled in human flesh before human eyes, and who is now presented unveiled to our memories and faith in the truth and majesty of what

He really is, grant us all, in His own good time, to behold Him face to face and eye to eye, where saints and angels and all the companies of the blessed rejoice for ever in the light of His countenance.

THE
INCARNATION OF GOD.

VII.

THE INCARNATION OF GOD.

"Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God (which He had promised afore by His prophets in the holy scriptures), concerning His Son, which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh; and declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead."—Rom. i. 1–4.

We are invited to-day to turn our thoughts with special devotion to that great truth upon which the gospel, as St. Paul here says, is founded—the awful and overwhelming mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God, the truth expressed in the beginning of St. John's Gospel, "The Word was made Flesh." It must be, indeed, to Christians, their continual thought. But, year by year, Christmas brings it back, as if it was something fresh and new,

and calls upon our minds to make a fresh effort to master its significance, and pay it the homage which is its due. It is no new thing. It is that which has supported the life and the growth of Christendom for more than eighteen centuries; and yet, in a sense, it is new once more every Christmas Day. There is a sight which happens every day we live, which, if it happened only once in a long period of time, would excite surprise and admiration beyond anything that the strangest phenomena or the most glorious scene we are acquainted with could call forth. Darkness changes into light, the sun arises over the earth every day; but because the sunrise happens every day, we are unconscious of the wonder and magnificence of the event, till something or other makes us *think*, and opens our eyes to what custom had blinded us to. Christmas Day is given to awaken us afresh to the rising of our Eternal Sun over the darkness and despair of the world. Once, at least, in the year we are made to remember what ought to call forth our adoring wonder every day, and all the day

long. To-day let us awake to it. To-day let us prepare our hearts to receive the impressions which psalm and hymn and lessons of Scripture are meant to make. To-day "let us go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us."

What is it that we shall find? What did the shepherds see there? They saw, we know, "a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in the manger." And it is the Babe lying in the manger, the scene of the Nativity, so like yet so unlike what has happened to each man born into the world, which is before our minds and memories now. Even in its outward aspect, it has its lessons, its deep and overpowering appeals to our thoughts and affections. But we shall ill answer to the call of our great Festival if we stop here. *We* have been taught what was behind the veil of helplessness and poverty. We know that it was no mere entrance on a career in this world of time, amid circumstances of commonplace obscurity, made striking to us by their contrast with a

mighty future, of one who was to be great and to do great things in the sphere of our mortal life. It was no birth of one who was to be a great law-giver, or conqueror, or prophet, or king. There is one, and one only thought which can adequately fill our minds at a time like this: a thought beside which all other marvels, all other instances and displays of God's interest in the concerns of His creatures are thrown into the background. It was the coming into this world, the child of a virgin mother, but otherwise under the conditions—the common conditions, of our humanity, of the Everlasting and Almighty Son of God.

I. Such an event as that can have nothing like it, or parallel to it, while this world lasts. It is the turning-point in the history of the world. The gospel of Christ—which as announced by His Church from the first, has made the Incarnation of the Eternal Son what St. Paul made it—the centre and heart of all teaching, worship, obedience, and morality, the fulfilment and end of all that was old, the starting-point of all that was new—the gospel of Christ

refuses, and must ever refuse, to compromise with any view of religion, which puts this tremendous truth in any less than its paramount and sovereign place. It has been forgotten at times; it has been displaced for a season by ideas and doctrines which the exigencies, or the accidental disputes, or the corrupting fashions of the age brought to the surface; it has been fiercely assailed, or subtly explained away, or shrunk from as something too overwhelming to human imagination. But it reasserts itself in the latest century as in the first. Let the Christian Church become serious after being careless and frivolous; let Christians become thoughtful after having been superficial and shallow; let them become alive after having been dead, and the first thing which meets them, the first thing that occupies and stirs their minds from their depths, is this amazing and transporting mystery of the Eternal Son, born *man indeed*, to live and die. You may as well divorce the thought from the word in living speech. You may as well divide the soul from the body, and hope to leave the living

man, as you may separate from the gospel of the New Testament—from the religion which calls itself Christianity, the belief in the Word made Flesh.

This is the great thought, the great fact, that faces us this morning—God has been made man. God has, indeed, taken human form and flesh—this form and flesh that we bear. God, *our* maker, *our* upholder, the maker and upholder of all worlds—God has been with us, has trodden our earth, has spoken with human words, has worked with human hands, has suffered human pains, has wept with human tears. God has been with us, the Eternal, the Ineffable, whom the heavens and the heaven of heavens cannot contain—*here*, in certain of the years of time, on the hills of Galilee, in the streets of Jerusalem. God has been with us—the Most Mighty, the Most Merciful, in the form of a servant, as the carpenter's son of Nazareth, as a little child. Men have looked upon the face of God, and it was the face of One who called them His friends, His brethren. God has been with us, and seen our life, what we are and

what we do, all our sin and all our need, our hardness, our anguish, our helplessness—seen it with the eyes of a man, with a heart as human in its sympathy and brotherhood as it was divinely perfect in its love and righteousness. God has unveiled Himself to us here, to be as man the Healer and Restorer of mankind, to regenerate them by His word and truth, to shed the blood which was to redeem the world. Is it possible that such a thing could be, and not that all things else be changed by it? Can such an event have had its real place in what has passed in the ages during which mankind has lived and acted here, and must it not have made a change which nothing else could conceivably make in the world, and life, and all things belonging to them? Can we steadily fix our thoughts on what it means, on the words which enshrine it in the Creeds and the *Te Deum*, and not see that, after such a day of God—such a visitation and presence as nothing can be compared with, except the first day of Creation and the last day of the world—after the Incar-

nation in this our world of the Eternal Son, nothing could be henceforth, in fact or in our thought, as it was before—"neither life, nor death, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature." All things are made different—absolutely, universally altered; and from that moment a new world begins, as truly as the old one began, with new knowledge, new hopes, new powers, new laws. How could it be otherwise, when it pleased the Eternal Father to work so wonderfully and so strangely for us men and for our salvation? How could it be otherwise, when—with what in our poor human language we are obliged to call, with *such awful and such serious interest*—God so loved the world that He gave His "only begotten Son, to take our nature upon Him, and as at this time to be born of a pure Virgin?" What profound and complete revolutions in the conditions of our state, what renovations, what unimagined prospects, must not surely follow on such an act of God? Think of what was promised, think of what was expected, even

by those who waited for the consolation of Israel, before He came: the "Seed of Abraham, in whom all the families of the earth should be blessed;" the "Son of David," who should reign from sea to sea, and whose kingdom should be as long as the sun and moon endure; the anointed One, with wondrous and mystic names —"The Child born to us, the Son given to us, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace;" "Immanuel, God with us." Think of it all, and at its highest, as it was thought of in the darkness, or in the twilight before the dawn, before the Sun rose, before the Dayspring from on high visited us in the manner in which He *really* was to visit us; think of the promise and expectation, and then, of what in fact is fulfilled. And surely we are not able to measure the gap between them, the infinite distance between the loftiest mysteries and enigmas of prophecy and the clear certainty of the truth—most incomprehensible, most sure—of the advent of the Word, who was God, the Word made Flesh, and dwelling among us.

II. The Incarnation was the turning-point in the history of this world; and, as a matter of fact, we have before our eyes the consequences which have followed from it. In the good and in the evil, in what the world seems and what it is, in its tendencies, its motives, its efforts, in what is visibly on its surface and in its secret forces, in the depths of men's hearts and their strongest purposes, that awful Presence, which was once visibly in the world, has made things different in it from what it ever was before. They are incommensurable in the nature of the case, the ancient and the Christian ages: there is no common measure between them, and vainly do we try to invent one.

But I turn to another aspect of the subject. We have, each of us, one by one, our concern with this great truth. For each man, as for the world, the Son of God was made man, to help and enable each man to reach the perfection for which he was made. For each of us, did He humble Himself to this awful condescension of His love; for each one, He was born and died;

for each one's restoration and strength and blessing, He has in store all that has been done by His becoming man. His Incarnation has been made known to us, not only for the public Creed and confession of the Church, but for the private need and private use, for the personal hope and stay, of each of our souls. And to know and master what it means, to realize, as we say, what it is, and what it is to *us*, is the turning-point of each man's belief. Like the realization, and bringing home to our own selves, of the idea of death; like the becoming alive to the great questions—whence am I? what am I? why am I here? whither am I going? like as it is, when in the stillness of meditation, there opens on the mind the overwhelming thought of *what God is*, of what *God must be*;—so is it with us, when first we are able to take hold of the amazing word: "The Word was made flesh;" God was made man. Once let a man grasp the idea, not only that some great one came to save, and teach, and forgive, and justify him; not only that some one came to die for him, or rose from the

dead that his whole moral nature might be raised and restored, but that He who came was, in simple truth, no other than the Very and Eternal God; that He who came, came by being born of woman, came in the substantial truth of human nature. And not only is the whole gospel lighted up with new glory, but its reference to himself receives a new force, breaks upon him with inexpressible and tremendous meaning—"Who loved me, and gave Himself for me." To think that He who did this for each one of us, that He who loved with such self-sacrifice is He, of whom *all may be said* that the mind of man can conceive, and the tongue of man can utter, of the Almighty and Everlasting God—*this* is a revelation to a man's spirit, which, whether it come gradually, or come, as it may do, suddenly, in a moment, is one of those things which lift him up out of the commonplaces of routine religion, one of those things which bring him face to face with the real questions of his being, with those fateful alternatives, the choice of which decides the course of life and its issues.

We may not know it or take it in; the Creed, the Gospel of St. John, the Epistles of St. Paul, may be matter of words; we may not be able to put living meaning into them. We may overload and cloud it with subordinate doctrines, with the theories and traditions of men, with a disproportionate mass of guesses on what is not given us to know—of subtleties and reasonings in the sphere of human philosophy. We may recoil from it and put it from us, as something which oppresses our imagination and confounds our reason; but we may be sure that on the place which we really give *it* in our mind and heart, depends the whole character of our Christianity, depends what the gospel of Christ means *to us*.

III. We see in the Incarnation and the Nativity, how God fulfils the promises He makes, and the hopes which He raises, in ways utterly unforeseen and unexpected, utterly inconceivable beforehand, utterly beyond the power of man to anticipate; and, further, we see exemplified in it that widely-prevailing law of His government, that in this stage of His dispensations with

which we are acquainted—which we call "this world" and "this life"—that which is the greatest must stoop to begin from what is humblest, the greatest glories must pass through their hour of obscurity, the greatest strength must rise out of the poorest weakness, the greatest triumphs must have faced their outset of defeat and rebuke, the greatest goodness start unrecognized and misunderstood. Is it not something almost too great for the mind to endure—the contrast between what the eye of man really saw, and what really *was*; between what *was to be*, and its present visible beginning? When we go back to that first Christmas morning, and think of that poor manger in that poor Jewish town, and of Him who lay there, must we not feel as if there was a spell in the world to blind our eyes to what is real, and that we are passing through it in a dream, when that was the first sight that human eyes ever had of Him who had made all things, of Him, men's only Hope and Joy, of Him who was to be their Judge? Is even the Cross itself so overwhelmingly marvellous

as the humiliation of the little Child? But so it is. So He willed. So it should be, in the perfect harmony of the eternal purpose. *So*, then, in those depths of lowliness and self-abasement, of feebleness and neglect, began that path which was to lead the Son of Man, through shame and death, to the right hand of the Father. So began here, *in time*, that reign of all the ages, which was to win back to Him who had made them, the world of souls, and fill heaven with the multitudes of the redeemed. From such a level did *He* start on His course of warfare and sacrifice for man—the second Adam, at whose name, at the end, every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth, King of kings, and Lord of lords. St. Paul himself, St. John himself, cannot find words to tell the mystery of accomplished purpose, by which God "gathers together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are in earth, even in Him," "and hath put all things under His feet and given Him to be Head over all things to the Church, the

Body of Him who filleth all in all." And here, in Bethlehem, wrapped in the swaddling clothes, He was One in whom the shepherds could see no difference from any other new-born babe.

Christian brethren, you who are as much interested as they in this disclosure of God; you who know more than they did of its awful meaning, do not let this time pass without an effort to bring home to your hearts the things you have to do with—the Person who is the centre of it all—the lesson which, as far as men can follow it, He teaches you.

When wonder, and adoration, and thanksgiving, if it were possible, without bounds, have had their due, there remain the practical impressions to be laid up for the actual, serious definite work of life. You are the heirs—you cannot doubt it in presence of that manger-cradle—of a hope which passes measuring here. You are the object of a Divine solicitude and love, interested in an economy of grace and recovery, of which human language is absolutely incapable to reveal the fulness. But, in the meanwhile,

you are men and women, with your appointed parts to play on this earthly scene —with time to waste, to spoil, or to elevate, with the risks of unfaithfulness and carelessness, with the sure rewards of self-discipline and sincerity, with a heart and character to fashion after the mind of Christ, with an allotted and fast shortening term to finish your work. What can you learn for your own guidance from the mystery of His Incarnation, His Nativity, and Childhood—from these stages of His work, from which He would not excuse Himself? Is it not, surely, that *we* must begin *our* eternal work, as He was pleased to begin His, according to that law which He has laid down for the kingdom of God, by which those who are to reach the highest, must have known and welcomed the humblest and the lowest. "Except ye become as little children," is His characteristic word, "ye cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven." The lesson of patient waiting, lowliness of heart and self-estimation, patiently and faithfully fulfilling the tasks of the present, patiently waiting as time moves

insensibly on, and keeps us still from much that we stretch our hands to; patient resolution, in trying again and again, for Christ's love, what we have often failed in; patient endurance of the facts which make us conscious of the scantiness of our powers and knowledge, of the poverty of our character, of the ill-success of our endeavours; patient determination to learn and bear the truth about, *against*, ourselves; patient courage to feel that we are but beginners, and that we are without the gifts, the strength, the excellence that others have; patient waiting and patient hope, till of the seed which we sow in faith, the years shall bring the fruit. Lowliness, in such as we are, and in our condition, means simply truth—truthfulness in our judgement of things and of ourselves; truthfulness about ourselves before God. To become as little children is to recognize the reality of our condition in this life of time—its disproportion to the endless life before us, its weakness, its frailness, its sin, its vanity—the limitations of our knowledge, the poorness of all we are doing now; and yet, through

such poorness of doing and dimness of knowing, has all that has been ever here worthy to be called great worked its way. It is sown in weakness, it is unknown in growing, it is despised in its first appearings; and it is *after all this* that it bears its blossoms, and is crowned with its fruit. So is it in the work of the kingdom of God. What is there, according to this world's standard of greatness and interest, in the dull, dreary, disappointing struggle against our own faults and selfishness; the long labour of self-conquest, the detail of the trouble of watchfulness and self-correction; the often wasted, and yet still repeated prayers? But through such a discipline—who can say through any other?—have human characters, hardly conscious of what was going on, waxed strong and holy, and fit for their Master's triumphs—sprung up to the heights of nobleness and saintliness.

We look on, some of us almost with a shudder, at the drudgery of Christian labourers—plain, simple people, dull in themselves, dull to the dignity of their calling—in the squalid courts of our cities,

in the loathsome dens of vice, by the cold, dismal sick-beds of the poor, in crowded schoolrooms, amid misery and darkness, and lives without joy and hope. We are glad, perhaps, that there are some to do it; and glad, perhaps, that it is not ourselves. And yet, will not one day declare, that in these uninteresting, repulsive, "poor and sick, and ignorant and naked," it was Christ Himself who was visited and ministered to? that what was done for the neglected children was done for Him who blessed the children—was done to the Child of Bethlehem? And can we doubt that when that great multitude which stands in white robes, and golden crowns, with palms in their hands, before the Lamb, and from whose eyes God has wiped away every tear, look back to the conflicts through which they came to their great beatitude, they will wonder at the littleness, the meanness, the paltriness of the trials which were then their daily experience, their daily cross, the commonplace difficulties of their lives—poor things, of "the earth, earthy"—which yet were, in their

appointed hour, the trial-ground of martyrs, the steps by which, here, the saints made their approach to the likeness of their Lord?

We cannot but be children, do or think what we will, in the face of the powers and mysteries of this immense universe of Nature which surrounds us. We cannot but feel ourselves children, in the presence of the chances and uncertainties of a dark and menacing future, impenetrable, beyond man's control. But He who made us, He who guides all things, descended, even to the lowliness and helplessness of childhood, that He might comfort us—descended, as the first step of His everlasting triumph. Let us entreat Him to help *us* to descend, from our ignorant pride, from our vain and self-wise confidence, to the level of what we are in His eyes. Let us think of ourselves as children, in the presence of that supreme mystery with which all our destiny is bound up—children before the incalculable humiliation of the Son of God, before the infinity of His greatness and His love;

children, on the brink and threshold of that vast, unchanging life, to which this one is but a play-time and a trial-ground, knowing nothing except in part, yet with the fortunes of an eternal existence in our hands. May He who loved us, and in all things gave Himself for us, convert us to become in heart and spirit like the little children whom He blessed—convert us from our blindness, our folly, and our sin, to the lowly trust, the purity, the simpleness, the cheerful readiness, the joy of childhood, so that we may grow up to Him in all things, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ—*here*, even here, as we are able, amid the errors and miseries of our mortality; *there*, in the completeness of that perfect and stainless world.

THE INCARNATION AS A FACT.

VIII.

THE INCARNATION AS A FACT.

"And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father), full of grace and truth."—St. John i. 14.

These words sum up that wonderful Creed which we have just rehearsed and sung; rehearsed, as our deepest belief, and as the only foundation of all our hope for ourselves and for the world; sung, as the expression, poor and inadequate at best, of the triumphant joy and thankfulness with which we ought to offer such a confession of our faith to God. It is wonderful at all times; but wonderful and awful, indeed, is a day like this, when the significance of its realities and its mystery breaks into fresh light on our souls, and year by year we seem to live over again

those ancient days, so far off from us, but which every Christmas makes so near, and so new, and so blessed.

Let us think for a few moments. Who was it who came? and how did He come?

I. Who was it who came into this world, more than eighteen centuries ago, as at this time? "The Word," says the apostle, "was made flesh." And who was the Word? Was it some prophet, a voice from God, bringing His word to man? It was more than that. Was it some Being, more than man, created on purpose to be the messenger of God to His creatures, and to declare His will with more authority than any human being could declare it? If we believe anything at all about Him, it was more than that. Was it some great angel, a dweller in the secret place where thought of man never approaches, seated near God's throne, ever beholding the face of God?—was it such a one, who was sent to clothe himself with man's form and flesh? Was it Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God? Was it Michael, the Prince of Angels?

Was it one of the Seraphim, who day and night cry aloud, "Holy, holy, holy"? It was more than that—more, infinitely more than that—one to whom highest angels were but messengers and servants. Was it some heavenly Person, greater, higher, more ancient than the archangels, created *almost* from all eternity, to be the companion of the solitude of the Godhead on the eternal throne, to be His minister in all creation, the revealer and utterer of the mind of God, the sharer with Him in the worship of heaven and earth—all but God? Again, if we hold the faith of St. Paul and St. James, if we believe Him of whom we are speaking, it was more than this. The gulf is infinite, the gulf is impassable, between such a supposed being and the reality declared in Scripture—between God and the highest of His creatures. Who was the Word? St. John tells us, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by Him; and without Him was not

anything made that was made." "The Word was God." This is He of whom it is said, "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us." This is that Jesus Christ, of whom it is written, that "She brought forth her first-born son, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn." The Son of God, only-begotten, equal to the Father, ever with the Father, by whom also He made the worlds; "God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God;" "the brightness of His glory, and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power." "The first-born of all creation: *for* by Him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by Him, and for Him: and He is before all things, and in Him all things consist;"—not to be named with the angels, for the angels were made by Him, and Him do the

angels worship—"Far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come." Only He knew the secret of God, for He was one with God. Only He had seen God, for He was the Son of God, "in glory with God before the world was." "No man hath seen God at any time; the only-begotten Son" (Himself God), "which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him." And from the "glory" and "bosom" of the Father He came, to be a little child, born in Bethlehem of Judaea, the city of David; and He who came, was God.

This is He who came. These are not paradoxes, contrasted as violently as possible, to startle, to produce effect. Thought of man faints and sinks, when it begins to see what such a mystery means. But the words which declare it are the plain words of truth and soberness. They are the simple, the inevitable result of what Scripture tells us, of all that has followed in the faith and life of the Church. Think of it,

my brethren, for it is indeed such a thing as heaven and earth may well wonder at for ever and ever. Think of your Maker, your God, coming down among us, leaving all that He was on high, "emptying" Himself of His glory, sacrificing all things, to be with men. When you read in your Bibles of the "little Child," remember that the "little Child," who was "born" to us as at this time, was indeed this, but also was the Very and Eternal God who made the worlds, and set the stars in their places, and feeds every living thing, and upholds at this moment each of our souls in life. When you read of the Child Jesus presented in the temple, circumcised according to the Law, in danger of death from Herod, carried into Egypt to escape him—remember that you are reading of Him of whom it is said, "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, which was, and is, and is to come."

II. This was He who came; and what was the manner of His coming? He condescended—and this was the unutterable greatness of His condescension—to become,

really, entirely, seriously, very Man. The eternal and adorable Son of the Father, He became truly and fully the Son of Man. He took our flesh and blood; He breathed our breath of life; He was, while He was here, man with men. There is no getting below that, in measuring the meaning and depth of His humiliation for us. We sometimes speak as if it enhanced the wonder of His humiliation, that He did not come in majesty and glory, that He did not come as a ruler and conqueror, that He put aside all that the world can offer. What could such things be to Him? It is natural that *we*, dazzled and blinded by what we now think great—that we should so judge. But if He came at all, *what* to Him could be high or low, as high and low are counted in the thoughts of men? He was the Almighty God, really God; He was man, really man. What among the passing things of time and sense, could add to, or take off from, the infinite greatness, the infinite wonder, of such condescension? It was enough, that He was "made man"; if He had had the world

visibly at His feet, His humiliation could not have been less; if He could have descended yet lower in the social scale than He did, His humiliation could not have been greater. *All* was said, when it was said of Him, "And she brought forth her first-born Son." All was given up, surrendered, sacrificed, when we read that "the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us." We judge by our human measures, when we dwell on all that He gave up besides. Of course, it is natural, it is inevitable for us now to do so. We know, we feel, we value all that He gave up. We know how He passed through that life of man on earth, which He accepted from its beginning to its close. We know that there was nothing so pinched and hard and trying in man's condition, that it was not His will to go through. We know that there is nothing so mean and scorned, so rough and dangerous in what the poor of this world have to put up with, that did not fall to His lot when He came among men. That we might not feel Him to be in lot and condition *above* any of us, He

chose to be *below* most of us—on a level with the meanest and the most helpless. He asked for no privilege as the Son of God; He refused nothing appointed to man to go through; He desired not to be spared any burden of our mortal state. As each thing came in the course of years, He accepted it. He hurried nothing; He waited till the years should change the babe into the child, and the child into the boy, and the boy into the man. For He came to be among us, not a passing vision, or a strange spectacle, but actually and in earnest to be man with men, to be "flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone," to bind us to Himself in life, and in death, and in resurrection. He came that we might see and know that, being what He was, He had made Himself one of ourselves, living our very life, feeling, suffering, buffeted, tempted like man, but without man's sin. But what was all this, what was *even* this, to the great, supreme, central fact—the descent of the Godhead to the Manhood, the descent of the infinite and the uncreated to the limited and the mortal?

This was indeed the "emptying" Himself which St. Paul speaks of. It would have been the same, if He had come down from the heights of the Godhead, to be the highest and most wonderful and most honoured of men. What in His sight could be the difference between being poor or rich, between being famous or unknown? To our imagination it may be much; to Him who had done what He had done for us, nothing. Coming to live and die for all men, to draw to Himself the hearts of all men, to feel for all men's sorrows, and heal all men's sins, He accepted—was it not natural?—what was most *universal* in human experience, and that is pain and suffering. He chose for His own condition of life what was the most *common* and ordinary one, that one in which in every age the vast majority of men have to go through life, and that is the condition of poverty, of privation, of obscurity, of servitude and toil. These were the natural, the fitting incidents of His coming; it would have been more strange if it had been otherwise. But

they are light in comparison of the tremendous fact itself of which they are the fringes and accompaniments — the great and awful humiliation was the Incarnation itself.

What shall we say, how shall we feel, in the presence of such facts as Christmas compels us to face? Shall we "seek great things for ourselves" in the various ways of the world? Shall we think it hard to have to pass through life, it may be, without all that our heart desires, that we think our due? Shall we despair of our life, shall we sullenly undervalue its blessings and its hopes, and almost wish that we had been spared both what it gives and what it exacts, because of its grave uncertainties, and difficult problems, and threatening prospects? Shall we make ourselves unhappy, and be discontented and envious, unless we have the success, and the gifts, and the indulgences, and the flatteries, which our Master would none of? Once more, Christmas comes to warn us from wandering into ways so far from His. He was the Everlasting, Almighty, Ever Blessed God.

And He was willing to be man; it was enough for Him to be man—a real man, a simple, plain man, unknown, unhonoured in the world, "made like in all things to His brethren," sharing their lot, sharing what they must go through, sharing the gloom and dreariness of life, sharing the bitterness of death. My brethren, let this be enough for us—that we are *men*—men under the hand of God who loves us. We share that nature which the Son of God came down to take. What must it be, *only to be a man*, when you think what He did to save and to bless mankind? What must it be, *only to be a man*, when you think that it is to be what Jesus Christ was once—and is now at the Father's right hand. Let it be enough, to be of that nature which God cared for so wonderfully, for which He has opened such a road to perfection, for which He has provided such wondrous hopes. It cannot be a small thing to be a man—to be what our God and Maker was pleased to become, that He might be more closely joined to us. It cannot be a small thing to be man, with

man's destiny; to be man, with the honour put on man by God. What, in comparison of this, are the worldly additions, the worldly recognition, which we so often think necessary to make life worth living, to make it noble and happy. Let us take in the full impression of the truth. Let us reverence these bodies of ours, mortal though they are—this flesh and blood, in which the Lord of all things was born, and lived, and died, and rose again, and went up to His glory. Let us thank God that He has deigned to call us into being; that He has made us like His Blessed Son; that He has breathed into us the breath of life; that He has given us a living soul, which can know and will and do what is right, which can grow in goodness and holiness, which was so precious in His sight that His Son was willing to be like us, that He might die as we do, and die *for* us; a soul which, in the darkness and mystery of our present existence, *can* yet really know and feel the love of God—is capable of an affection towards a Being out of the world, deeper and stronger than to any one in the

world. And let us remember that as He came for the good and blessing of each one of us, so He came for all men round us, all our friends and neighbours; for those whom we think above us, or below us; for those we love; for those, too, from whom unhappily we may be estranged—who, *we* think, have done us wrong, and who probably also think that we have done them wrong. He came, He was incarnate, He died, not only for those who hope that they are in His grace, who, knowing His salvation, are travelling through life in peace and hope, perhaps *so* easily, free from the fierce storms and trials which abound; but for those, too, who are buffeted, misguided, blinded by the tempest; for those whose numbers pass all count, and confound and frighten us; for the outcast and the forlorn; for the ignorant and foolish, who have no teacher; for the miserable, who have no one to take their part; for the weak, who have no helper; for the lost ones, whom all shun; for the sinners and the criminals, against whom all doors are closed. Surely, for them, too, the Great Deliverer came,

though we know not how; for those unknown and forgotten multitudes whom no man can number, in all time and over all the earth, who have had no comforter in their wretchedness or light in their darkness; for the measureless and manifold misery and suffering and oppression of the world; for the huge slave populations of all ages; for all the unutterable agonies that thousands have suffered from the sword, from disease, from the spoiler, from the torturer; for all that has been endured in all ages by those classes whom the ancient Church remembered by name at the altar—the captive, the galley-slave, the condemned, "appointed to die." Surely, the Redeemer has thought of all in His pity, and remembered their distress. He in His mercy will take good heed of the "sorrowful sighing of the prisoners," of the "comfortless troubles' sake of the needy, and of the deep sighing of the poor." To Him, we may be sure, though His dealings are out of our sight, that their sins, their sorrows, are as important as ours. Remember, it is a terrible and heart-piercing

thought, how many are cut off from all the joy of Christmas, for whom Christ came down as much as for you and me—for whose wretchedness He who came once in the extreme of weakness, feels in heaven that sympathy which they cannot have on earth. Little, pitifully little, as any of us can do to remedy the world's misery and sin, at least let us open our minds to the truth to which Christmas recalls us—that the world *is* in such misery and sin; that our Maker Himself came down among us, to share the nature of us all, to heal, if it might be, the wounds of all of us, to compassionate the sorrows of all of us, to seek and to save the souls of all of us. Let us pray Him, on this His blessed day, to remember all who need His great mercy, all spirits and all flesh for whom He deigned to be made flesh. Let us pray Him, who knows the name of each, who knows every one from his mother's womb—who, in the ancient liturgical words, is the Succour of the succourless, the Hope of the hopeless, the Saviour of the tempest-tossed, the Harbour of the voyager, the Physician of

the sick[1]—that He would Himself become all things to all men, who knows each man and his petition, each house and its need. He, as it were, pleads with us now, to turn in heart one towards another, to lay aside our high thoughts, our pride and our selfishness, our scorn and our little hatreds, in the presence of that awful Childhood, which was once as real as our own. May He be our teacher from the humiliations of His Infancy, as He is our teacher from the Cross. From both comes the same lesson and call: "Come unto Me, all that travail and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls."

[1] St. Mark's Liturgy; and Bishop Andrewes, "Wednesday."

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